

Christmas pudding

Reading: Psalm 24. Isaiah 25. Mark 13.23-31

*The earth is the Lord's and all that fills it,
The round world and all who dwell therein.
For he has founded it upon the seas
And made it firm upon the rivers of the deep. (Psalm 24)*

*Dame get up and bake your pies,
Bake your pies, bake your pies,
Dame, get up and bake your pies
On Christmas Day in the morning. (Traditional)*

I have to admit, I'm an incorrigibly last-minute person when it comes to Christmas. All through October and November, I'm busy saying, yeah, I know Christmas is coming — but not yet! It's too soon! And even in December, there seem to be more and things that get in the way of starting my Christmas preparations. I love Christmas — but somehow I'm always reluctant to let it into my life.

However, doing the Christmas baking on Christmas Day in the morning, like the Dame in the old nursery rhyme, is cutting it a bit fine, even for me! Though I did once electrify the congregation at my church in Handforth by telling them (on Christmas Eve) that I had just made my Christmas cake that morning. You could hear a sharp intake of breath from every pew ... To be fair, it was a Delia Smith recipe which involves soaking the fruit in sherry for three days beforehand, and has nuts on top so you don't need to ice it (highly recommended for last-minuters!).

The Christmas pudding, though — that was different. I was brought up proper — I always knew fine well that the pudding had to be made before Stir-up Sunday (the last Sunday before Advent). We always made two, one to eat this year and one to keep until next. I still use my Granny's war-time recipe (you can see my grandson having a go at it on the Advent Calendar). It matures very nicely, and I like it because it's not too sweet (so you can serve it with as much brandy butter as you like — and of course doused in flaming brandy). Usually I make it when the family visit me at half-term, so that everyone can join in stirring the pudding and making a wish (youngest first — and don't tell!). This year, of course, no visits — so they had a go at making it themselves. That's how traditions are passed on, after all. And there's something very satisfying

about seeing that tightly-sealed pudding basin sitting quietly at the top of the fridge — a kind of pledge that Christmas *is* coming — ready or not.

Every family has its special bakes and recipes that belong to Christmas — they're part of the rituals that make Christmas happen. They fill the kitchen with tantalizing sights and smells — only to be packed away in the freezer with a 'Don't touch' notice ('Wait and see!' as my grandmother used to say). They're part of that Advent feeling of tingling expectation combined with the satisfaction of making something with your hands, reviving skills you thought you'd forgotten. They link us in with memories of the past — not just our own family traditions, but reaching back to older and simpler ways of cooking and preserving food.

Steaming the pudding takes you back to days when most people didn't have an oven, just a hook over the fire — and a pudding-cloth to tie up the pudding over the steaming pot. And the spices and dried fruits belong to a time (before we had freezers, even before we got oranges and sugar from the New World!) when people had a barrage of traditional techniques for preserving the fruits of summer to make them last through the winter. Raisins and apricots, figs and dates (remember those long wooden boxes?) came to enrich our diet from the spice traders of the Middle East: ironically, one of the results of the crusades was that Europe began to open up to the rich and ancient food cultures of the Middle East. (Mince pies are another link with Middle Eastern cuisine — originally made with minced meat as well as dried fruit.)

"From the fig-tree learn its lesson," Jesus said (Mark 13.28). So what Advent lessons can we learn from the Christmas pudding? First, I think, it reminds me of the Advent psalm: *The earth is the Lord's and all that fills it* (Psalm 24). The Christmas feast is a celebration of the earth's bounty, the fruits of the earth brought from sea and land. It's a token of the careful baking and preserving and storing that goes on in kitchens to make summer's bounty last through the winter — and a reminder that we shouldn't take for granted the easy transport and cheap refrigeration that mean our generation has almost lost touch with the seasons.

Preparing for the Christmas feast is also an invitation to share in the generosity and hospitality of God's bounty, a feast where all are welcome. *Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord, and who shall stand in his holy place?* Baking implies guests — and wouldn't we love to be able to share our feast with family and friends, this year of all years? Maybe this year we'll have to share it on-line —

or find ways to turn our baking skills into Christmas gifts. Maybe this year the Advent theme of longing and witing will be uppermost in all our minds — because we live in a world that is waiting for the full revelation of God’s abundance, freely shared with all.

But above all, I think, the Advent rituals of baking and making remind me that Christmas is about a God who comes. *Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors: and the King of glory shall come in.* Subtly, surreptitiously, the coming of Christmas creeps around my resistance and overcomes my fears. No other festival invades every corner of our lives like Christmas. It refuses to stay decorously in church, like Lent and Easter. It invades my house, my kitchen, my cupboards. It demands changes in my daily routines. The Christmas pudding tells me of a God who isn’t content to remain on the margins of our lives — who wants to invite himself into my home and sit at the kitchen table and share a cup of tea. A God who comes to live amongst us, to be part of our lives — and transform them for his glory:

When God Almighty came to be one of us,
Masking the glory of his golden train,
Dozens of plain things kindled by accident,
And they will never be the same again.
Sing, all ye midwives, dance all the carpenters,
Sing all ye publicans and shepherds too:
God in his mercy uses the commonplace —
God on his birthday had a need of you.
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Have you got Christmas food memories or recipes to share? Email me or Anna (annacp22@googlemail.com) and we’ll share them on our Facebook page.

God bless, Loveday
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