

THE ETHICS OF FORMAL HALL

Throughout history, our ancestors have recognised that eating is quite important. But – for the vast majority of our ancestors, and for countless millions of our contemporaries, getting food is not easy.

So it's hardly surprising that what most people today regard as 'religion' – is rooted in food. In the fact that, if you have to hunt down food, and then end the life of a large mammal, it takes massive effort. And if you've ever had to hunt for survival, without the benefit of a rifle, then you have to form some kind of relationship with your prey. You have to imagine yourself into their shoes (or paws or hooves), you have to know where they will run, how they will run, what kind of rest they need, how they function in heat, how they fight back. And hunting food for a village would often take hour upon hour of physical and mental exhaustion. So that when you finally take the life of your prey – something significant has happened.

It's not like you simply purchased a hog roast at great cost, so you can have a feast. There is a bond between hunter and prey, so that at the moment of death for the prey – something significant happens. If you've ended the life of any wild animal that has struggled to survive every day for several years, and you are the person that ends that life – it can be a profound moment- especially if you're going to eat that creature.

This is captured quite well in the opening scene to the movie version of *Last of the Mohicans*, where – having tracked and raced through the American wilderness, and finally killed a gigantic elk, the hunter caresses the head of his prey as the life bleeds from his body, with the words – “We're sorry to kill you, brother. Forgive us. I do honour your courage and speed, your strength...”

Those moments, are quite possibly the foundations of religious ritual. And the origins of saying grace before a meal. In many cultures, the animal would be brought back to a village, where the tribal elder – not the priest or shaman – the tribal elder says the prayer over the prey. Because it is the leader who has provided food, the lifeblood for his people. And it is the tribal leader who does this, because they have organised and led the tribe well enough to allow for the hunt to be successful. That is why, it is not the chaplain who says grace before a dinner – as many might expect with it being a religious practice. But it is the head of house, who is hosting the dinner and responsible for the community.

And saying grace before a meal, is not then to say, “I'm in charge” – but for the communally appointed leader to recognise, along with the entire community, that eating is quite important. And how a dinner is the product of effort from employees, donors, staff, casual staff, fellows and students. And because of the Form that a Formal dinner takes, it communicates a huge amount about what a College is! So – when you sign up to a Formal dinner, you are not only signing up to eat – but you are also signing up to the particular Form in which that eating takes place!

Now in a context of what we might call, late-stage capitalism, there may be varying views about the validity of the Formalness of a formal hall. Are we entitled to do as we please, because we paid money for this? Or do we treat this as a privilege, and sit in fear about which item of cutlery to use, before the food police sweep in and condemn us for using the wrong fork?

Well – Jesus had quite a lot to say about the ethics of eating together. The reading from Luke, is in the context of a large, wealthy house where a formal dinner is taking place. And the steward is busy welcoming guests at the door. And what is Jesus' advice? Enter through the 'narrow door'. This has often been read as a metaphor for getting into heaven. The image of the narrow door shows how God has impossibly high

standards – so it's hard to get in. But when you look at the architecture of a wealthy town house from this era, the narrow door is most likely, the side door. The side door. The tradesman's entrance. The staff door from the underground car park. In other words, if you want to enter the Kingdom of God, you do it as a worker to put in, not as royalty to take out. As a staff member who's here to do a job, not an aristocrat who's entitled to be waited upon, as a servant rather than a master. That, is how Jesus encourages his followers to enter a formal hall!

And I wonder, in our formals, how this might play out. Because the way that we behave at formals can reveal core elements of our identity, our appreciation of privilege, our assumptions of entitlement, our readiness to conform or to rebel. And if you have a rebellious streak, against what and who would you rebel? The College? The staff? The convention? The traditions of Cambridge? The culture of capitalism? The prevailing norms of unselfconscious entitlement, and blind privilege. With what do we conform, and from what do we rebel?

Yes, in the past, we have had organ scholars who rebelled. (In the distant past). After someone 'pennied' his desert, he complied, ate his Eton Mess with no cutlery, and was banned from Formal Hall for a full term. With what was he complying? And from what was he rebelling?

Yes, there are students today, who get up and wander around tables, to and from social toilet visits, like they were in a pub rather than a formal dinner. And again, with what are they complying, and from what are they rebelling?

But if you enter through the narrow door, through the worker's door, the tradesman's entrance – what do you see then? The efforts of chefs and catering staff? The stresses faced by the waiting staff? The behind-the-scenes busyness of running this dinner. And I wonder, if you were to go and thank these folk right after the dinner, ask their name, express gratitude to them. If you wrote to the catering department the day after the dinner to thank them for their efforts – with what might you be complying, and from what might you be rebelling?

Jesus's parable concerns entitlement and privilege. And plenty of caricatured views from outside Cambridge would see all of us as nothing other than entitled and privileged. And the validity of their views are measured not by the offence we feel, but the way we act! The little acts – that we might not recognise as significant.

Now, regardless of where you sit, and what opinion you might hold of a formal hall, If you were to enter through the side door, and – you got to look at yourself through the eyes of those who work at our dinners – what would it say about you? About who you are? About how you treat others? If you got to look at yourself as one who entered through the side door, what might you learn about yourself, and what might it tell you about your College, and your role here?

The origins of a communion service, are a formal dinner – in which the greatest and least find themselves in unity, in which equality saturates the entire experience, in which greatness and humility are reversed. A meal in which we learn who we are in relation to others, and the greater Other.

Eating is quite important – and the way that we do it reveals far more about us than we might be comfortable hearing.