

Spiritual Formation: Some Lessons from the Kitchen

Text: John 21:1-14

A sermon preached in the Whitley College chapel for ordination candidates
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This was not what I'd planned. Here I was crouching down in the sand in a secluded alcove by the Sea of Galilee, a television camera metres from my face. Supposedly, we were close to the spot where Jesus had cooked breakfast for his disciples. It was a moment I'd long anticipated. It was meant to be serene, spiritual, profound. It wasn't.

The wind was buffeting so forcefully we had to relocate to a little tributary under the cover of a gnarly old tree. The rain was drizzling and the murky brown water lapping just inches from my feet. Balanced precariously in the sand was a little gas cooker on which I held a frypan full of fish. The falling rain made the pan sizzle and my wrists smarted with the splutter of hot oil. Leaves from the tree kept falling into the pan and then I stood too quickly and scraped my head against a branch. I now had a gash to my forehead and a trickle of blood running into my eyebrow. And all this with a large fuzzy microphone dangling overhead.

I was in Israel for the filming of a 13-episode series made collaboratively by Channel 7 and Anglican Media. The Show was called *The Bishop, the Chef and the Fisherman*. The concept was the professional fisherman from Cairns and the church historian—then the Bishop of North Sydney—would fish

together in some biblically appropriate place—the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, or on the Mediterranean—and then I, the chef, would cook whatever they caught and say profound things about the spirituality of food. Trouble is, in thirteen episodes all they caught was an undersized talapia on the lake and a big greasy catfish in the Jordan.

So here I was, crouched down by the water, my frying pan full of sardines hurriedly purchased in the Tiberius fish market that morning. The cooker was faulty and had only one temperature: hot. My charred sardines looked about as appetizing as a can of cat food. And then, to top it all off, a busload of Japanese tourists arrived. The producer told them I was a famous television chef from Australia so they all started to taking flash photographs from every possible angle. Needless to say, my television career was short lived.

I have often wondered what it was like for Jesus that morning. As a chef, I wonder if he enjoyed cooking. Was the fire hard to light? Where did he get the bread? Would the resurrected Christ have overcooked the fish?

Spirituality and food are inseparably linked for me. In fact, as Lecturer in Spirituality, I have to confess that most of what I know about spiritual formation I've learned at the stove, or

certainly as I've reflected upon life from the perspective of the kitchen. So with the aid of my own experience and this captivating story of Jesus cooking breakfast, I'd like to say a few things today about the nature of *spiritual formation*, with the sub-title *some lessons from the kitchen*.

Spiritual Formation: What Is It?

We often say at Whitley that *spiritual formation* is central to what we're about. That is, we aspire to the formation of women and men as followers of Jesus. When all is said and done, we long for those who come to us to be challenged, even changed, by God's presence and God's call.

That said, this business of spiritual formation is a slippery one. It's certainly one I struggle to get a hold of. Oh, I would long for every one of my classes to be life-changing encounters with God for every participant, for every lecture I give to open up new vistas on the nature of faith and our vocation in the world. Even the titles of my classes this semester, *Living the Faith* and *Experiencing God*, are rather audacious claims to what I hope for.

Realistically, though, what can I expect? What role do we really play in the formation of women and men as followers of Jesus? It's a question as much for pastoral leaders as it is for teachers of theology.

Earlier this year I read Michael Ruhlman's fascinating book, *The Soul of a Chef*. Ruhlman follows the journey of six men and women seeking acceptance as *Certified Master Chefs*, the highest and most prestigious accolade awarded by the *Culinary Institute of America* (or the CIA), the gastronomical mecca of the US.

It's an arduous journey and culminates in a live-in five-week battery of testing, from dawn till dark, an exhausting and unforgiving process by which every imaginable culinary skill is placed under the microscope. It's not for the faint hearted. Those who submit themselves to the experience are already consummate professionals, already lauded for their skill and talent in the very best culinary establishments in America. This is not about the certification of good, competent cooks. It's about the stamp of greatness, a stamp that the majority never receive. Four out of the six fail and return to their respective kitchens and careers, devastated.

Partway through this story, Ruhlman makes an observation about the hallowed halls of the CIA:

This ... was an extraordinary place; I never failed to feel the rush of the air there, the pursuit of excellence, the professionalism, the intelligence ... woven into a building and an idea. The school taught the basics. It didn't teach soul. It couldn't. That was an individual concern regardless of place. Great cooking either was in your soul or wasn't; maybe you were born with it, maybe it was hard-wired into your mind during its formation.

In the margins I scribbled "a bit like a seminary." Well, not entirely. There is an implied elitism in this observation that I would not want to see in a community like ours. The call of God is never exclusive. In a tradition that honours the priesthood of all believers, talk of discerning the *good* from the *great* is nothing but theological foolishness. The point, however, is this: soul is not something to be taught. The formation of followers of Jesus is ultimately the

Spirit's work, not mine. I am not the formative agent. Whitley has no magic formula for the production of faithful disciples. At best we're facilitators, providing a place, an opportunity, supportive relationships and good resources. The reality is, every person who comes to us arrives with a rich and complex story of faith already unfolding. You know full well that your formation began long before you walked through these doors. It's in you. Our job is help you engage with what's already begun, and to do so more intentionally, thoughtfully, biblically.

That said, what does it mean to be spiritually formed? For you? For me? And for those we minister to?

1. Connecting With Our Past

The renowned Frenchman Antonin Careme has been dubbed the world's first celebrity chef. Born into desperate poverty in the early 1800s—child number fourteen of twenty six children—he was abandoned as a child by his father on the streets of Paris. Careme commenced his career in adolescence as a humble pastry chef and from there began his meteoric rise to international fame as Chef to the Who's-Who of European aristocracy, from Napoleon to King George IV, from the Ramonovs to the Rothschilds. Further, Careme is lauded as the father of haute cuisine. Single handily he set the parameters for the development of modern day classical cookery.

In the biography of his life, *Cooking for Kings*, author Ian Kelly observes that, despite all of this, Careme was never able to forget who he was. Throughout his career, he held purposefully and tenaciously to the philosophy that every meal must begin

with soup. No matter who he cooked for, he would never divert from this rule. For Careme, soup was the most democratic of foods—untouched by the barriers of class—and the sharing of soup the most communal of acts. No matter how lauded he was by the aristocracy, Careme would always be a common man. It impacted everything he did, most notably his writing of cookery books that inspired a new generation of domestic cooks.

It's always interested me that after the momentous events of the crucifixion and the resurrection, what is it that Peter chooses to do? "*I'm going fishing,*" he says to his friends. It seems an odd choice. Was it entirely pragmatic? After all, resurrection or no resurrection, the family still had to be fed. Or perhaps it was a retreat into the known and familiar when everything else was confusing and overwhelming. I doubt we'll ever know. What is sure is that whatever Peter and these other disciples would achieve and become, they would never cease being fishermen.

We come to any process of formation as people with complex lives. Our stories thus far are rich with experiences of life, struggle, pain, success, failure, regret and hope. Any process of formation that does not allow participants to bring all of that to the table, to unpack it, to understand it, to reinterpret it in light of God's presence, is inadequate. To be spiritually formed is not to leave the past behind as some irrelevant chapter of a previous life. To be formed spiritually is to own who we *have been* as an essential part of who we *are* and what it is that we have to offer others.

2. Living Well Who We Are

Another star in the gastronomical sky of Europe was the more recent Bernard Loiseau, the larger than life, irrepressible chef, loved by all of France and awarded the prestigious three stars by the Michelin Guide for his restaurant in rural France. Indeed, to be so rewarded was Loiseau's life obsession.

Facing failure after failure and against incredible odds, Loiseau worked tirelessly toward the one thing he longed for most. However, as Rudolph Chelminski reveals in his biography, Loiseau was dogged his entire life by an unrecognized and untreated depression. His professional highs were matched only by his devastating lows, lows that very few people ever saw. Under the captivating veneer of bravado and self-promotion, Loiseau lived in perpetual fear of failure. Tragically, in the early months of 2003 and at the height of his career—panicked by the unfounded rumour of his imminent demotion to just two stars—Loiseau took his own life. His devoted wife Dominique found him in their bedroom with the gun by his side.

Contrast this with the life and career of Thomas Keller, the American Chef similarly lauded as one of the greatest chefs of modern times. Best known for his work with the Californian restaurant *The French Laundry*, Keller's life has also been lived according to a vision. A man as passionate about his work as Loiseau. Interestingly, a man as beset by depression and the struggle with his own demons. Yet today he thrives, a man of deep spirituality and an unusual sense of balance. Though not overtly religious, Keller speaks of a sense of calling to his work and finds in

it a reason for being.

Two chefs, one who was never able to come to terms with himself, the other finding a sense of purpose beyond himself yet expressed through his unique gifts.

As the disciples are fishing in the lake, an unproductive night behind them, Jesus calls out to them from the shore. In a moment of recognition, Peter throws on his garments and leaps out of the boat, madly wading his way toward Jesus. What else would Peter do? True to form, he's the Peter we've come to expect. For all the time spent with Jesus, he was still impetuous, stumbling, emotional, a man of faith, a born trail-blazer and, I suspect, as full of himself as he had always been.

To be spiritually formed is to be most authentically who we are, living who we are well, and living *with* who we are well. No doubt, all of us struggle with being ourselves from time to time. We are all too aware of our own weaknesses, frailties and shadows. Who of us never longs for certain basic personality traits to be different from what they are? Who of us, at least from time to time, does not look longingly at someone else and wish we were more like them. I sometimes look at those I work with and wish I could be more like each one of them. To be as pastorally wise and sensitive as Colin, as intuitive as Marita, as focussed and disciplined as Ross, and intelligent and insightful as Frank, as self-giving and gracious as Keith, as consistently gentle and warm as David, but I am me. And you are you. To be spiritually formed is not to become someone else, nor is it to become *like* someone else. It is to reflect the image of Christ in the way that only we can.

3. Embracing the Now of Vocation

Without doubt, one of the most intelligent, engaging and gifted chefs Australia has produced is Gay Bilson. Best known for her pioneering work in the 70s with partner Tony Bilson in the Sydney restaurant Bon Gout and then for her solo work at the internationally acclaimed Berrowa Waters, Bilson is one of the few chefs able to write as intelligently and beautifully as she cooks. In her recent book *Plenty: Digression on Food*, Bilson reflects back on her career in the kitchen. As one points she writes of her early years:

"I'd finish plating desserts and baking souffles in the Kookaburra, with Jordan in a papoose on my back, then clean up and sit on the laundry bags. In retrospect I see this connecting space as the one I never left, mentally or emotionally, in twenty-five years of running restaurants and cooking. It is the space still connected to the work and the working staff but edging towards the audience, towards a need for recognition. I didn't always sit there is contentment in those days, but there was that marvelously satisfying sense of fatigue and completion that all professional cooks, brilliant, middling or bad, understand and which seems sometimes to be what one works for."

At the end of the day, the business of cooking is about as mundane and down to earth as it gets. No matter how plush the surroundings or how fancy the china, food is food. One who cooks for a living does what they do night after night. And each night it's back to the basics. To excel is to be able to reproduce excellence plate after plate, sitting after sitting. To be really good at it requires being fully present in the moment, each and every night. Bilson

discovered this and found within it a sense of meaning and connection.

It has always fascinated me that of all the things the risen Christ could do before his ascension into glory, he chose to cook his friends breakfast. It so down to earth, so normal, so ordinary, and yet such a beautiful picture. Bread and fish; a lonely stretch of beach; friends gathered around an open fire; the boat and fishing nets only metres away. We know that the conversation that follows is deeply formative for Peter: Jesus' questions about Peter's love and then his reinstatement of Peter in ministry. But this profound act of ordination happened over breakfast.

Mistakenly, we often assume that our formation as disciples arises most profoundly out of the extraordinary moments and encounters of life. What's more that our formation is always about preparing us for some future ministry or vocation. As Jesus shared fish and bread with his followers on the beach, one has a strong sense that vocation is as much to do with the *now* as it has to do with *tomorrow*. It has as much to do with who we are today and where we are right now as it has to do with who we'll become or where we'll be tomorrow. The process of spiritual formation is not just a preparation for the main game played elsewhere. It *is* the main game, at least in part.

My little three-week jaunt around Israel was an eye opening experience on many levels. But more than anything, I was struck by just how ordinary and everyday these places were. From a distance, the places and encounters of the gospel story can have a romantic haze about them. All halos and flowing white robes. But as I walked the ruins of the neighbourhoods

and villages where Jesus spent most of his time, they were anything but romantic. Perhaps the fish was overcooked, the bread a bit stale, the ground where they sat rocky and uncomfortable. But it was real.

Cooking's a bit like that. With all the trendy cooking shows, the glamorous recipe books and the dazzling kitchens, one is left thinking that this business of cooking is mysterious and out of reach to commoners like us. But it's not. It's as much about burnt pots and stodgy rice, rushed breakfasts and rowdy dinners as it is about beauty, perfection, and candle light.

So too with spiritual formation. While it is a mystery indeed that we should be made in the image of God and through the work of the Spirit, formed in the likeness of Christ, how and where this mysterious business unfolds is much more immediate and everyday that we might expect. It's within you, around you, behind you and before you. It's yesterday, today and tomorrow. It's fishing and cooking, laughing and praying, working and resting, studying and having dinner with friends. It's now.

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