

Seasons and Seasonings

Please note: This short article is posted under the “New Testament” tab simply because there are less articles here than in other sections. Thus the article has nothing to bear directly with the New Testament.

There are special times throughout the year that capture our attention more than others. They can be short or fairly extended as well as anything in between. The passage of time, notably growing older, contributes to the blurring of distinctions and time between events. At the same time the more important ones stand out as they should. All the rest tend to fade away, again as they should. If this didn't occur, we'd be overwhelmed with a whole mess of information. The importance of these events vary from person to person. They lift us outside our habitual way of living and move us in a direction we may not have envisioned.

If an event is really special, we wish to commemorate or even recreate it as with the celebration of a major milestone...a fiftieth wedding anniversary, for example. One way to make these these times more permanent in our memory is to consider the word “season.” It has a special connotation as related to a time of the year made all the more attractive by reason of its association with the sense of taste as well as smell. In other words, a season is a more comprehensive snatch of time not unlike the Greek *kairos* for special event as in the New Testament. For example, a particular calendar season can be remembered by the scents associated with it: the smell of the ground in spring when planting, the scents given off by furniture during summer's humid days which otherwise aren't perceived, the burning of leaves in autumn and the almost pleasant exhaust from cars on a cold winter's morning.

Each season and the scents associated with it are distinct and not bound by the limits of time. We have the ability of recalling them as though they happened yesterday regardless of how many years separate us from the initial experience. The same applies if we're in a season different from the one in which we had perceived a given smell. Note the paradox: smells are harder to nail down yet almost by reason of this, they register more deeply because something physical is involved. It's more so with taste because we are consuming something physical which seems to leave an equally physical mark within us. When down the line we recognize what we've smelt or what we've tasted, no explanation is needed. They are present before us with practically no time gap, simple as all that. By the way, this brings up an interesting association. Memory is usually thought of as something abstract. Here as with tastes and smells, the mere recollection of one whiff or taste is sufficient to actually perceive the smell and taste. We could say mentally, but then again, you wonder what's going on. Such is the mysterious power of memory.

It may be argued that the senses of smell and taste are more primitive, primitive being taken as equivalent to inferior. Whether or not this is true doesn't matter. What does count is the experience that's registered...not just that but stored up for future reference. Here seems to be the raw material which contributes to our moving from a perception of time to season. A season is a determined stretch of time that repeats itself with the same contents. In addition to its association with smells and tastes, a season(-ing) tends to be a longer duration in time. A season's tendency to repeat itself means that more material is at our disposal in order to enhance other "flavors" associated with it. Perhaps this is at work in our subconscious...who knows...but the end result is a fuller appreciation of a season as opposed to a given lump of space and time.

To appreciate the value of the recurrence of a season, the most important criterion is to slow down our ordinary pace of life, easier to say than to accomplish. Little digression is needed here since we're all familiar with the hectic way we go through a given day; putting it into practice is a different matter. After all, we're dealing with more than the passage of time. Involved are our past experiences of a given season imbued with all kinds of smells and tastes, this extending back further the older we become. Also included is a more acute sense of missed opportunities, a direct product of a modern life style which offers close to an infinite array of choices. Even if we've been blessed to have a good stretch of slowed-down life, if you will, never does it seem enough. Even that can produce regret, but it's far less lamentable. We're keenly aware of missing something as it speeds by us which can make us unsure of our destination. With death and therefore extinction looming up ahead, this awareness is enough to make anyone break into a cold sweat. But if theoretically speaking the bulk of our lives were a season, we'd face death with serenity.

There's an interesting parallel to the cycle of the four season outlined above and seems to get lost in the shuffle yet contains an inestimable treasure. That treasure consists in the Church's liturgical year which commences shortly after Thanksgiving or a month prior to the beginning of the calendar year. This puts the liturgical season slightly askew relative to the more familiar (secular) way of telling time. Nevertheless, the two are sufficiently close when it comes to marking time with regard to passage of the four seasons. The Church considers "New Year's Day" to be the First Sunday of Advent, not January First though that's a solemnity, Mother of God. Advent kicks off a whole slew of prophecies and expectations which prep us for the actual beginning of this intervention, the birth of a man who also is God and who will continue being at the heart of every part of the advancing liturgical year.

All in all the liturgical calendar is personal, not a blind impersonal marking of time, as is the case with the calendar year progressing through the four seasons despite the richness

each has to offer. Jesus Christ isn't the only inhabitant of this calendar though he's the one around whom it revolves. He's accompanied by the Virgin Mary, a whole slew of saints and even events as well as the consecration of churches, all these giving the liturgical cycle an incredibly varied character. If, for example, we're not attracted to a particular saint or feast day, wait a day or two. Something to our liking is bound to come along. Furthermore, the liturgy is a *res publicum*, a public affair, not private, even though we may be alone. Celebrating the Divine Office has become more popular in recent years. While better to do in the company of a few people, no problem if you're alone because you're anchored in a reality larger than your own little world. Thus the societal and individual are unified, an insight available to anyone who, for example, does the Divine Office called the Opus Dei or Work of God according to the **Rule** of St. Benedict.

Marking each day, even if it's so-called Ordinary Time which comprises the bulk of the calendar, gives a sense that we're going somewhere, not standing still nor marking time. Better, yet, we're going to Some One. As for the initially odd-sounding phrase Ordinary Time, it suggests that days other than feasts, etc., are not ordinary in the sense of being boring or empty days in between feast days but are *order*-ed. And that order has its roots in Pentecost, the beginning of the Church, and is the agent responsible for the subsequent flow of Ordinary Time. So it turns out that regardless of the liturgical season we're in, this calendar in its entirety is rather crowded. It serves to erase any anxiety about moving to the next commemoration because all these are *order*-ed towards Jesus Christ. Here there's no room for any impersonal feelings with regard to the passage of time even though we're conscious of moving through it. This is more revolutionary than at first glance and deserves serious reflection. It's as though we've been made for *order*-ing our lives according to liturgical time, an awareness that grows the more we pass through each cycle. Besides, we have the celebrations of the calendar year thrown in as a bonus with its secular holidays.

Superficially it can be argued that the liturgical year is not much better than calendar time, going around and around with the same old "stuff" making its appearance. Despite the personal accent of this way of telling time as related to Jesus Christ, familiarity with it can breed a sense of pretty much standing still...of going through the motions of performing rituals and observances. But then you take a glance over as to what drives society. That boils down to intense excitement before a given holiday which, once over, is gone and forgotten in anticipation of the next (and so forth). As long as we're in motion is all that counts. To think like this is to view the keeping time as existing on a two dimensional plane not unlike the calendar one which advances along a flat, straight line, if you will. Nothing exciting about that, let alone conducive to growth.

On the other hand, the liturgical calendar resembles an upward spiral. As already noted, it begins with Advent and works its way through a series of other seasons celebrating the life of Jesus Christ along with a company of holy men and women (and places) until it returns the next Sunday of Advent. Once there, we could say that it moves upward a notch, does another cycle and so forth. What separates it from calendar time is that we have plenty of opportunities for growth. Should we fail at one go-around, the next upward spiral offers hope. Calendar time is hope-neutral. That is to say, there's nothing but days and events marked more or less passively with little impact upon a person. And so when a given day arrives, there's something empty about it, detectable by the way we discard it the very next day. When we come upon a person or event in the liturgical calendar, there's a personal connection. Their celebration passes too but somehow is incorporated into our spirits. So when the next celebration rolls around 365 days later, the connection between that feast day and us is something special by reason of its intimacy. Sometimes the what may be considered minor or even inconsequential commemorations are the ones that count, the big ones standing out on their own. Regardless, all are on that upward spiral by reason of participating in a larger reality. Calendar time simply is devoid of that, through and through. Perhaps its most redeeming factor is marking the passage of seasons. Even the marking of holy days hold little significance by comparison, they having crept in chiefly due to earlier times when a sense of the sacred was more dominant.

Liturgical time thinks in terms of seasons where the sense of smell enjoys a special association with various feasts or commemorations, incense an obvious example. Then we have the scent of flowers according to seasonal availability. The chief seasons are, of course, Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter. Then there are the two stretches of Ordinary Time: the short one roughly between Christ's Baptism to Ash Wednesday and the much longer one from Pentecost Monday to Advent. Despite this latter being more closely aligned with calendar time, it's chock full of feasts and commemorations...far from being "ordinary." So while the four seasons are marked by distinct smells, the liturgical one relies more on the sense of hearing although as noted above, the sense of smell is not entirely absent. Hearing is absolutely essential because we're listening to the readings both at Mass and in the Divine Office as well as during any church related activities. Just as important if not more so, hearing is amplified by singing which varies from season to season. So while the sense of sight is important—vestments, decorations and all the rest—they take a back seat as to hearing's paramount importance in the liturgy.

The sense of sight is one on which we rely the most to get around in the world although supposedly it's the one deceived most easily. Varying testimonies from accident and crime scenes seem to back this up. Even though police departments have equipped their officers with body-cams in the hope of providing an objective view of what is transpiring, what they record is subject to being challenged. One reason for the multiple ways of viewing an

event stems from the state of mind of the witnesses, of how focused or distracted they may or may not have been. This, in turn, is over-laid by the addition of thoughts after the event muddied by the usual onslaught of distractions. And so we end up with quite a multi-layered cake to decipher. Interference from the other senses may play a part, but their influence usually is quite secondary. As for hearing, what another person says may serve to re-interpret one's original experience.

With the exception of the multi-faceted faculty of sight just discussed, the others senses are pretty much one dimensional, if you will, which instead of making them seem poorer by comparison, are more accurate when it comes to perceiving an object. They've relinquished what initially seems more comprehensive for something that's more specialized and hence focused. The problem with hearing is that it's fine in and by itself but subject to unwanted noise which, by reason of being interior to us, can skewer our reception more profoundly. Hearing, if our attention is sufficiently focused, thus can have a deeper resonance. However, to achieve that is more difficult than it appears. Then there's taste and smell, more uniform and direct than the first two. It seems they are the most reliable senses in that nothing interferes with them. Yet as we all know, cooking is an art. A person who enjoys eating isn't the same as one who prepares the food. Also, we can recall a smell or the feel of something years after the first impact. Because of this, they have the ability to arouse memories of past events with greater clarity and sureness than sight or hearing. It can be argued that taste and smell are primitive (true), but they register with us the deepest and stay the longest. Scent, of course, is something we absorb over which we have little or no control unless we hold our noses.

By way of an interesting side note which takes this discussion on the senses to a new level, consider vs. 1 of the first letter of St. John: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands concerning the word of life." All senses are involved with the exception of taste. As for sight, two verbs are used, *horao* or to see in the sense of perceiving or observing plus *theomai* or to behold in a more continuous fashion. Note that *horao* has "with out eyes" as though to specify it further from *theomai* which we could call a more a full-bodied presence towards something. Then there's hearing and most interesting of all, touching with the hands. The verb here is *pselaphao*, to grope or to feel after much as someone who is blind when trying to make his way. Now take this sensual mode of contact with the "word or *logos* of life" which means feeling this *logos*...Jesus Christ almost groping him. And *logos*, of course, is more than a word but an expression and hence pretty close to presence which involves a perception involving the whole person.

Getting back to the sense of taste, we can consider another scriptural passage where the psalmist gives the injunction "Taste and see that the Lord is good" [Psalm 34.8]. Note the

order: first tasting followed by seeing, not the other way around. The vision, if you will, that follows such tasting should be more reliable in that it's more focused and not distracted this way or another. Again, referring to the experience of cooking, it's like "seeing" the just-right taste after laboriously creating a cake, for example. Easily we can tell if it's off...too little or too much sugar, seasoning and all the rest. "Texture" might be a good way to describe the final result. But one wonders and naturally so, what this tasting happens to be as it pertains to God who transcends all senses as well as the intellect. For sure, we don't use our tongues in order to *taham*, a verb also meaning to discern. The same applies to our eyes when it comes to the seeing or *ra'ah* at hand.

Because the psalmist order us to *taham*, he has reliable personal information that it works and results in *ra'ah*. Hence the reason for putting the psalm verse in the form of an injunction. In other words, go out and try it for yourself as we engage reality with these two senses. The first is the more "unreliable" one followed by the "reliable" one. Quotations are deliberate and inserted in light of what just said as to the supposed dependability of sight. However, the *ra'ah* at hand follows *taham*, not the other way around. As for the object of *ra'ah*, it isn't God himself but an attribute, that he is good or the common adjective *tov*. Still, tasting what is good is vague. It needs seasoning, if you will, to bring out the inherent flavors. So the psalmist may be intimating that before *taham* which effects *ra'ah*, we should, like chefs, discern which seasonings are the best for a given situation. That will depend upon each individual. As to making the correct choice, that's something that comes naturally and can't be taught. Faith in the innate soundness of our faculty of taste seems to be the most fundamental disposition here. However, by reason of it practically having fallen into disuse, we need to foster its development. Perhaps reading Psalm 34 from which the "taste and see" phrase is lifted may be a start. Even more direct, finish the verse which reads "blessed is the man who takes refuge in him" while pondering what this refuge just might be. One hint is that all senses are focused and integrated, not scattered about before the injunction "taste and see."

So here we are with the most basic and inward of senses pointing out that which is beyond us or what essentially is imperceptible. Yet the sense of taste which is the most intimate of them all ties in with seasoning which embellishes food. In some cases, seasoning disguises what we don't wish to taste. Our mind has direct contact with the food in our mouths and needs no explanation or better, distance as in the case of sight, in order to make a perception between our tongue and the taste register in our brains. Obviously the sense of smell is related directly to taste. If we don't like the smell of a particular food, we don't taste it. It doesn't work the other way around, however though both relate to whether something is palatable or not. The sense of touch is not unlike the one at hand. It's both external and internal, applicable more to feelings which can be deep-seated and rouse us to action much to our surprise. Touch reveals knowledge that can't be communicated easily

except, it seems, by reciprocation. Furthermore, this sense gives rise to our imagination perhaps unlike the other senses as it moves from something intimate to the abstract even if that abstract object is felt inaccurately.

We could go on listing the yeas and nays of each of the senses, but that would miss an essential ingredient we need to bring to bear upon them that they may come alive. It so happens that we need to cultivate what may be called a presence...attention...which means focusing in upon how each sense (or several working at one time) influences a given situation. Presence is another word for giving direction to achieve a specific end. However, the notion of “end” has nothing ulterior to it but is a common way of speaking...of being attentive to what’s transpiring right now. If we’re not present to how we flavor a particular food, it won’t taste good, simple as that. So the skills that go into making a good cook are not that different from what we’re trying to get at here.

Being present to the sense of sight consumes the most energy since so many things are transpiring before us as we attempt to sort them out. To sort out the good stuff from the useless means slowing down the action that we may pick out sights from the background data, those which resonate within us, and see how they tie together. Hearing is not unlike this though it’s generally easier because we not as exposed to so much “stuff.”

Nevertheless, noise can be a real problem as we all know. Hearing also is more difficult to register on our brains which is why so many biblical prophets have admonitions such as “they hear but they do not understand.” As for taste and smelling, they are more interior and immediate to us (not that hearing is less so). Thus these two senses have less distractions, if you will. Here a distraction may consist in something too hard to the touch or too much seasoning in food. Also the word “tasteless” assumes new meaning in this context. So in the long run it seems that once you either taste or touch something, it’s registered for good.

Returning to the liturgical cycle, the way it’s set up can be a valuable tool to order our five senses, hearing being the primary sense as noted earlier. The cycle of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and Ordinary Time has its own particular sights, sounds, smells, tastes and even touch. Actually it’s more helpful to consider each of the five as a season. From there it’s a small jump to the idea of a season-ing. As we all know, seasoning gives life and character to food. It takes some care to pull this off right, and one of the more interesting ways of doing it is by the sense of hearing. Yes, hearing in the literal sense. You pay so very close to the cooking process, how the food interacts with the container its in, etc., a subtle change in sound telling us when to add the appropriate seasonings. Once added, they change the tone of the sound, albeit slightly but discernible provided we’re tuned in. Applying this technique to a liturgical year, each time a given season or feast day rolls around, we add a different seasoning to it, seasoning being an insight. It doesn’t have to be

grand, but added in accord with our disposition. Thus we flavor at each go-around. Even if we miss one season, we're assured of another in order to enhance the new one with a different flavor. And the process is endless not in the sense of losing our bearing but of the opportunities presented to us.

As for faith, it's essential to grasp the content of the liturgical year both as a whole and in its individual parts. Faith sounds pretty abstract by its association with this sacred manner of telling time and talk about the role of the senses but is not. We could say it's the chief organ that gathers up all our senses and unifies them in order to suck out what we can. Faith fosters what we may call *stabilitas* which has its roots in monasticism where monks are known for their loving observance of the liturgy. They don't move about from place to place, an essential requirement for getting at the heart of what the liturgy is all about. In other words, the seasons and the season-ings that go into it, if you will, can only be done effectively if you don't move about but allow the liturgical cycle to move you. Sounds abstract and idealistic but far from it. Just go to a monastery, sit back and pay attention to their liturgy and see if this is true. The liturgy being performed suffices to identify faith as something within our grasp, not being far removed nor abstract. And so the adaptation of our five senses to the passage of sacred time provides a criterion for perceiving movement. This used to be a more widely shared phenomenon, but with the rise of modern society and the mobility associated with it, has become a lost art. Yet should a person step out of this cycle...exchange it for the liturgical cycle...it turns out to be far better than going to the season, if you will, which would upset the whole idea of this sacred way of telling time ¹.

As for *stabilitas*, technically it's associated with a monastic vow. A monk vows to remain in one community for a life time, not moving from place to place, normal circumstances being taken into consideration. That enables him to be anchored in a given place, literally, and is a kind of martyrdom...witness...in that his chief role is to participate in celebrating liturgical time. Since this martyrdom extends for one's life, it's more penetrating than many forms of martyrdom that come to mind, most such witnesses lasting generally a short period of time. So when St. Benedict says "to prefer nothing to work of God" or the Divine Office, he doesn't encourage slackness in attendance but something deeper. He wishes a monk to stand still, as it were, and be aware of the grand cycle of sacred time coming to him not unlike the majesty turning of a galaxy. This mode of living, once not entirely unknown, almost has disappeared from common consciousness except, of course, in monasteries. So being in a monastery with this idea of sacred time making its slow, stately passage is not boring provided faith as just presented remains active.

1 One monk into his early 90s, now long gone, said that the advantage of living in New England is that the four seasons and their liturgical counterparts come to him. He doesn't have to go to them.

Getting back to the sense of taste, it's essentially passive but not dumb, an organ waiting patiently to be stimulated which means we have an active role to get it rolling. Tasting forces us to abandon visual perceptions (obviously the presentation of food is crucial) in favor of ones discernible only by ingestion. So when you're preparing food, you know in general what must be done to make it tasty...plus to have a savory odor...as in the case of Italian tomato sauce. That necessarily limits the ingredients. So when we have in mind what we wish to prepare, we pick the appropriate spices for the sauce. It's interesting to observe someone who's been doing this a long time. He goes through the motions almost in a trance, sometimes consulting a cookbook and at other times not doing so. In fact, abandoning such a reference can be taken as the sign of a chef instead of a cook² though obviously this isn't true all the time. Some kind of unidentified guidance comes over us when assembling the food, sauce being the example at hand. Our awareness is focused in a total way that picks the proper ingredients mostly from memory. We might recall how grandma used to do it and hold a picture of her in our minds rather than focusing upon the actual ingredients. Then we emulate it in a way where recollections of taste even from way back in childhood are just as present now as they had been. This memory takes over and chooses the proper ingredients pretty much without us getting in the way. It's quite amazing, really, to experience this.

We don't acquire the making of such Italian tomato sauce right away. At first we pay close attention to the person teaching us as well as following the recipe and do so to the letter. Then with some practice we let go and let things run on their own. As for a recipe, it become less important as our proficiency grows. It's difficult to discern the precise moment when this happens, but we do recognize the transition. Something similar happens when we go through the liturgical cycle or more broadly, in fact, with any learning endeavor. We start off following the rules (the technical term is rubrics) closely which later are not so much abandoned but allowed to become part of ourselves, of how we comport ourselves. Again, that hard-to-pin-down feeling comes into play which tells us automatically how to adjust. After all, the liturgy is centered upon Jesus Christ, not observance of this or that rubric, so we're dealing with ultimate reality. Obviously there's the danger of falling into minutiae and thus lose sight of how our observance takes over, not so much our participation.

+

2 The preparation of cakes seems to be the most general exception. You don't throw ingredients together willy-nilly but must follow strictly the rules of a recipe, else you'll end up with a disaster.