

Corned Beef or Turkey?

My grandmother used to talk – with some indignation – about the Christmas the family had a tin of corned beef for Christmas dinner. It was during the war when food was both short and rationed. Apparently, the butcher had promised to save them something nice and then let them down. I was reminded of this story by reports that we might run out this year of some of the things we are used to having for Christmas dinner. I got to thinking about what we have had in the past.

If I remember rightly, when I was a small child we used to have a chicken. That would have been enough for two adults and two small children. I had a great aunt who used to like a nice tame rabbit for Christmas dinner. Opinion is much more divided nowadays about whether rabbits are pets or food. They used to be both - with families keeping rabbits for months and fattening them up with vegetation the children foraged for in the hedgerows before the inevitable happened. Herbs like dandelions were rabbit victuals or “rabbit wittells” as it was pronounced around here.

It was when we started having large family parties for Christmas that we turned to turkey. I remember huge fowl which had to be cooked all night. We had some great Christmases in which eating well played an important part – together with drink for the adults, a tree, paper chains festooning the window frames and picture rails, bunches of balloons, party games, quizzes and community singing, including of course all the traditional carols. You can't stick drawing pins into PVC, which does rather restrict what you can do now to decorate a room for Christmas.

Later still, it was back to just me and my parents, my sister and, after she married, her family. We no longer needed an enormous turkey. To be honest, I think turkey is a rather uninteresting meat and not special enough for the second most important feast of the year. So we experimented. One year we had duck. When we discovered just how little meat there is on a duck, we were nearly as disappointed as my grandmother was with the tin of corned beef.

We tried venison. Mrs Beeton suggests that the carcass should be hung from the church tower until it is ready to eat. While I have two towers to choose from, I actually chose to get the meat from the butcher. Mrs Beeton's recipes include how to cook rein venison, which didn't go down too well with the children. Apart from the fact that it can be a bit dry, venison was good, though a little too deer for our budget.

I really enjoyed the years we had goose. Goose has to be cooked fairly rapidly with a pan to collect the vast quantities of fat. Goose fat is good for roast potatoes, cooking in general and for rubbing into your chest if you are afraid of catching cold. It was so good that I even considered having a flock of geese grazing on the churchyard grass to be culled at Michaelmas and Christmas, but other people and foxes might help themselves first and, anyway, I couldn't really eat anything I'd known when it was alive. Besides, geese can be quite aggressive and you might have been afraid to come to church.

Some years, we went for steak and chips. I really liked that, but one niece's husband thought it wasn't very Christmassy and he was right. So it was back to turkey for a few years.

Last year, of course, was COVID lockdown time and we weren't allowed to meet up with family and friends for Christmas. So it was back to a chicken for me and Tommy the dog, which we enjoyed very much.

This year, we ought all to be together again, but they say that there might be less choice of food than usual. There are also doubts about the availability of *must have* toys. I suppose what counts as *must have* depends to some extent on how old you are. In the fifties and sixties, my sister and I had a lot more than our parents had had when they were children, but they had done a lot better than their parents had for Christmas presents. A few years ago, a boy of about six complained to me that his mother wouldn't buy him an iPhone. He couldn't quite believe it when I told him that, when I was his age, we didn't have a phone at all. There was a red box along the road where you could ring someone up if you had four pennies to spare, but there wasn't much point for us children. None of our friends or relations had phones either!

All this raises the perennial question. What is Christmas really all about? It was worse last year missing out on seeing people than it will be this year even if we have to have corned beef for dinner and the children don't get the toys their hearts are set on, but we can still meet up with one another. Christmas is about love.

God is love and what God has done for us in the Birth, Life, Death & Resurrection of Jesus is pure love in action. The response it calls for from us is that we should be people of love, which means loving God and loving one another as God loves us. That is what Christmas is all about.

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For church information, including Christmas services, please see <http://www.cuxtonandhalling.org> or contact me direct on 717134 or roger@cuxtonandhalling.org or at the Rectory, 6, Rochester Road, Cuxton, ME2 1AF. I can put you on my e mailing list for the church magazine etc. if you ask me.