

Noxious 'thoughts' 1 - Gluttony

Neil Millar

The call to '*repent and believe the good news*' is an invitation to fullness of life that comes, paradoxically, by way of a death. If any would be my disciple, they must '*deny self, take up their cross, and follow me,*' Christ said, in the reading we heard last week. Why? Because it is the self-absorbed, ego-ic self, that blocks us from receiving fullness from God and truly seeing and loving each other. What constitutes and reinforces this 'false' self are certain habits of heart and mind – repetitive, oppressive ways of thinking and feeling, stories we keep telling ourselves, patterns of reactivity that keep us stuck in ungenerative loops.

According to Evagrius Ponticus, a desert monk and one of the most influential theologians of the late fourth century, there are eight characteristic patterns of thinking (*logismoi*), that lie at the root of this false self; eight noxious and diabolical thoughts that habitually disturb our peace and drive unhealthy behaviour. Last week, Ann gave a very helpful historical perspective on Evagrius, and over the next three weeks, and later in the year, I intend to explore each of these *logismoi* in more detail – what they are, how they 'cloud' our perspective and diminish our life, and how we might gain some freedom from them (repent of them). Today we'll look at the first thought on Evagrius's list, *gastrimargía* ('madness of the stomach'). We call it gluttony.

Tell me, when did you last hear a sermon on gluttony?? I can't recall I have, which is interesting given our culture's obsession with food. Obesity has reached epidemic proportions in Australia and, other disorders such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa are also a cause of concern. Food and drink are amongst the common topics of conversation at dinner gatherings; food

advertising is a billion-dollar industry, and on TV you can watch programs about food and cooking 24/7. Jamie Oliver, Gordon Ramsay, Rachel Koo and Nigella Lawson are household names, and shows like *MasterChef* consistently rate highly.

So, what is gluttony, and why such a problem? The Miriam Webster dictionary defines it as ‘excess in eating or drinking’, and as ‘greedy or excessive indulgence’. I imagine that’s how most of us think of it, and the word itself may evoke medieval images of the glutton as a figure of excess – greedy, drooling, out of control, and hugely fat; all mouth and stomach. In the 1400s, a series of popular woodcuts showed the gluttonous dead being force-fed toads, snakes and rats by bands of fork-tailed devils, while Dante’s epic *Inferno* tells of a filthy ‘third circle of hell’ in which gluttons are terrorised by a giant stomach with three wormlike heads. It’s deliberately grotesque and off-putting, a clear warning about the perils of indulging our most basic appetite.

Interestingly, Evagrius shows no interest in this caricature, and nor does he identify gluttony simply with intemperance in food or drink – which, after all, was difficult to achieve in the desert! For Evagrius, gluttony refers more broadly to the insatiable desire to ‘fill oneself up’. Over-eating is rightly considered gluttonous, but to think only in these terms is to miss its broader meaning of excess and indulgence. It could be that a person doesn’t eat much all, but spends an inordinate amount of time obsessing about it, being fastidious and picky about food – a glutton for the perfect diet. Or, it may not be about food at all, it could be something else: a glutton for exercise and the next hit of endorphins, or for work; a glutton for punishment, or even for the ‘highs’ of devotional practice. John of the Cross warned of the perils

of 'spiritual gluttony'. In all this, it's about craving and never getting or doing enough; never really being satisfied, content, fulfilled.

And what's key in all this is not so much the external behaviour, as what's going on in our heads, as what's feeding it. For Evagrius, it's the thought that lies behind gluttonous behaviour that we need to get at. He understood that the outward manifestation is a symptom of deeper distress, of an underlying mental and emotional dis-ease. If we focus only on reforming the outward behaviour, we're unlikely ever truly to gain serenity or what Evagrius called *apatheia*. Programs like *The World's Biggest Loser* focus on the presenting issue of overeating. But, as many a contestant's story suggests, the real craving is psychological and spiritual. A person can achieve outward success in reducing their weight, which can help them to feel better; but unless they attend to their compulsive habits of thought with regard to food, and the gnawing hunger within, they'll never truly be satisfied or free.

For Evagrius, madness of the stomach arises from a certain madness of the mind – a nagging anxiety from which we crave relief. '*The thought of gluttony suggests to the monk that he give up his ascetic efforts in short order*', he writes.

It brings to his mind concern for his stomach, for his liver and spleen, the thought of a long illness, the lack of life's necessities, and finally the horror of his body, its tissues bloated with fluid, and no doctors nearby to offer relief. These things are depicted vividly before his eyes...

The *thought* of gluttony for the monk arises out of fear for his health, for his security, for his future. Worry about his digestive system and how it will cope with the desert regime. He then finds himself wondering what it would be like to endure a chronic digestive disorder and how it would be exacerbated by the lack of regular food, and of what might happen to him so far from medical

help. He thinks about other monks who've suffered and this adds to his disquiet. 'In the isolation of the desert, facing long empty hours and trying to learn to pray, fantasies about food were difficult to avoid', writes Angela Tilby (91).

Well, that makes sense in the context of the desert monk, but what of our context. How might Evagrius' understanding of gluttony as an expression of anxiety and insecurity, of inner emptiness and dissatisfaction, help us? I think it's fair to say that issues of food security and survival are not as pressing for most of us as they were for those desert monks, and are for many today. Even so, as I've said, cooking, eating, drinking, dieting and associated issues are a huge deal in our society, and when you dig around, it's not hard to detect fear in the background – people getting edgy at the first intimation of hunger, for example, or at the thought of food (or toilet paper) in short supply; parents feeding children snacks on demand because they can't bear them showing any sign of distress; children (and adults) terrified by any sensation of inner emptiness – self-medicating with food whenever they feel lonely, sad, unsatisfied or bored.

And that's just the start. There's a bunch more anxiety related to *what* we eat: how is this affecting my cholesterol and weight, my digestion, my diverticulitis...; am I getting the right balance, needing supplements, eating too much fat or sugar or salt; does it contain gluten, lactose, nuts...; what about chemical additives, calories, food miles, fair trade??? I'm not saying it's wrong to consider these things, just that it's easy to get caught and oppressed in this area.

Evagrius discerned that behind acts of gluttony are unsettling thoughts, anxieties that inflame our appetites (passions). We need to be

freed of these if we are to find peace in ourselves and with God, ‘to appreciate the infinitely greater joy of real life’ (McIntosh 134).

But, how do we do this – change our minds, repent of these thoughts (metanoia) about food (or whatever it is we crave or turn to, to fill ourselves up)? Well, there is a sense in which tackling the outward behaviour is part of it. Strengthening the muscle of self-control, and in this regard disciplines of moderation and even fasting are important. But real transformation requires awareness of the inner workings of the temptation to gluttony, the ‘thought’. How do we deal with the mental and emotional dynamics that feed the behaviour? The first step is awareness – becoming more conscious of how this works in us. Here’s how one woman, Margaret Bullet-Jonas (who suffered for years with bulimia nervosa), described the unfolding for her:

It would all begin with a small seductive voice that made promises it couldn’t keep. ‘Here, I’ll take care of you’, it would murmur in my ear. ‘I see you’re feeling a bit down. Let’s just comfort ourselves with a bite to eat, shall we?’ ‘Oh no, not again’, another inner voice would object in alarm. ‘I’m not going to eat right now ...’. ‘Hey, you don’t have to feel that sadness. Don’t give in to it. Leave it alone. Come with me. Let’s go see what’s in the pantry. Just a little something to eat, that’s all you need.’

As Evagrius observed, thoughts will arise; it’s not in our power to stop that. What is *in* our power is to begin to choose how we will respond. And it begins as we start to see and name what’s going on, the deceptive logic, the false promise of consolation. If we indulge **or** try to repress these kinds of thought, they will only grow stronger. But if we respond by acknowledging and handing them over, letting them be, letting them go, they will recede. ‘Prayer is the laying aside of thoughts’, Evagrius taught, and this is the key - the practice of letting them be, letting them go... I say practice because it’s never just once for all. Noxious thoughts keep arising, and we have to keep

letting them go. Many people try it once or twice and then give up defeated when the thought returns, as if they've failed or God has let them down. That will never do. The work of repentance, of letting go thoughts is an ongoing practice – our 'noxious' thought can be deeply habituated, rooted (perhaps) in wounds or trauma, and reinforced over decades. Change at this level is the work of a life-time – as we'll continue to see in coming weeks. Even so, this metanoia is the practice that, by God's grace, leads us ultimately to true consolation, deep transformation and growing peace.

References

- McIntosh, M (2004) *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge*, Crossroad Publishing Co., New York.
- Tilby A (2009) *The Seven Deadly Sins: Their Origin in the Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius the Hermit*, SPCK, London.