

The Fourth Sunday in Lent (Mothering Sunday and Laetere)

Mary Berry's Simnel Cake recipe is below the sermon.

Collect

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen*

Readings

I Samuel 16:1-13

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

Of all the things that might reasonably be described as light and airy, Simnel Cake is not one of them. It is a rich cake loaded with candied fruits, encased in marzipan, topped with eleven balls of more marzipan, representing the eleven faithful apostles, and then toasted under a broiler, because apparently that seemed like a good idea to someone, sometime.

Today is Laetare Sunday which tells us to rejoice. Mothering Sunday gives us Simnel Cake, which helps us indulge. These two things are not obviously connected.

But here we are. A priest in pink. A cake that could anchor a small boat. Reminders of a no-longer used antiphon. And the longest gospel reading in recent memory. I almost burst out laughing when a nun came up to me on Friday complaining about the length of Gospel readings during Lent. I didn't know that nuns, even Episcopal ones, were allowed to do that.

She sounded exactly like me last Sunday when I apologized for the 37 verse reading. Today we've got 41 verses in a story that begins with a man born blind and ends with what might be the strangest closing line in all of John: *Now that you say "We see," your sin remains.*

Let's start with the mud.

Jesus walks past a man who has been blind since birth. Nobody asked for anything. Everybody kept walking. The disciples asked a theological question: whose sin caused this? Jesus essentially said, wrong question. Then he spits on the ground. (Yes, I switched to present tense to avoid the word "spat.") 322w1`lqhe makes mud, smears it on the man's eyes, and tells him to go wash. And the man goes. And he comes back seeing.

This is not a dignified healing. There is no laying on of hands, no solemn prayer, no mood lighting, no chanting. Sorry, Matt, no incense. Nothing that Anglicans, well at least this Anglican craves.

There is spit. There is dirt. There is a man walking through Jerusalem with mud on his face because a stranger told him to. And it works.

I want to suggest that this is not incidental. This is John doing what John does — taking the most physical, material, earthy stuff imaginable and making it the vehicle of grace. God doesn't hovering decorously above the messy human situation like a Hallmark card.. God gets all in it. Mud. Spit. Bread. Wine.

Which brings us to the Collect's petition we prayed together this morning: *Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him.*

This is Eucharistic language. And on this Laetare Sunday when we come up for air in the middle of Lent, it points toward the table we'll gather around in a few minutes. Many of us here hold some version of the belief that what happens at that table is real. Not merely a memory exercise or a symbolic gesture, but an actual encounter with the Living Christ in the bread and the cup. If you want a technical term, Real Presence will do. If you want a better one, try: *he may live in us, and we in him.*

That's not theology. That's intimacy.

And here's where the blind man and the Pharisees become interesting. The man born blind doesn't begin the chapter knowing very much. He knows he was blind, and now he sees, and a man named Jesus made mud. That's the sum of his theology. But he keeps saying it. Simply and stubbornly . . . every time the Pharisees try to make it theoretical or complicated. “I was blind. Now I see”. And by the end, when Jesus finds him again, he worships.

The Pharisees are different. They already know exactly what they think and they're not going to let facts get in the way. They have the law, the tradition, the authority. They never been blind. They've never had their reality challenged. And so Jesus says to them, in that last line that seems inexplicable until you sit with it, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say "We see," your sin remains.”

The sin is not ignorance. The sin is a certainty that leaves no room to receive anything. The sin is coming to the table already full.

Mothering Sunday, whatever else it is, is a day about being fed. The tradition: much older than the American holiday, rooted in the custom of returning to your mother church, is about coming home to be nourished. And the church's deepest act of nourishing is this: *evermore give us this bread.* Come hungry. Come not entirely sure of whats on the menu. Come like a man with mud on your face, doing what you were told, waiting to see what happens.

I had planned to show you photographs of the many churches that have mothered us over the years, a kind of visual family album. Our expensive, high-tech, color, wide-carriage printer has other ideas. It is a sophisticated machine. It is also, at this moment, completely convinced that it

has no paper, despite being fed very expensive glossy sheets that I can see with my own eyes. A Canon technician has been “on his way” since Wednesday. I am quite certain he believes in his printer more than he believes in me, even though I can see the paper sticking out of the top. I mention this only because it seems appropriate, on the Sunday of a man who was told he couldn't see and turned out to see perfectly well, that our printer cannot see what is directly in front of it. We will, I promise, have the photographs another Sunday. The churches that have formed us are real, whether the printer believes in them or not.-

We will bless Simnel Cakes in a moment. They are not light. They are not airy. They are dense and sweet and rather an excess. That is perhaps the point. Grace tends to be more than you expected, heavier with goodness than you planned for, inexplicably topped with marzipan.

And then we'll come to the table. And we'll ask, as we always do: *evermore give us this bread.*

He will.

Mary Berry's Simnel Cake Recipe

from *Mary Berry's Baking Bible*

Ingredients

For the Cake

- 100g/4oz glacé cherries
- 225g/8oz butter, softened
- 225g/8oz light muscovado sugar
- 4 large eggs
- 225g/8oz self-raising flour
- 225g/8oz sultanas
- 100g/4oz currants
- 50g/2oz chopped candied peel
- 2 lemons, grated zest only
- 2 tsp ground mixed spice
- For the Filling & Topping
- 450g/1lb marzipan
- 1-2 tbsp apricot jam, warmed
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Instructions

1. Preheat the oven to 150C/280F/Gas 2. Grease and line a 20cm/ 8in cake tin.
2. Cut the cherries into quarters, put in a sieve and rinse under running water. Drain well then dry thoroughly on kitchen paper.

3. Place the cherries in a bowl with the butter, sugar, eggs, self-raising flour, sultanas, currants, candied peel, lemon zest and mixed spice and beat well until thoroughly mixed. Pour half the mixture into the prepared tin.
4. Take one-third of the marzipan and roll it out to a circle the size of the tin and then place on top of the cake mixture. Spoon the remaining cake mixture on top and level the surface.
5. Bake in the pre-heated oven for about 2½ hours, or until well risen, evenly brown and firm to the touch. Cover with aluminium foil after one hour if the top is browning too quickly. Leave to cool in the tin for 10 minutes then turn out, peel off the parchment and finish cooling on a wire rack.
6. When the cake is cool, brush the top with a little warmed apricot jam and roll out half the remaining marzipan to fit the top. Press firmly on the top and crimp the edges to decorate. Mark a criss-cross pattern on the marzipan with a sharp knife. Form the remaining marzipan into 11 balls.
7. Brush the marzipan with beaten egg and arrange the marzipan balls around the edge of the cake. Brush the tops of the balls with beaten egg and then carefully place the cake under a hot grill until the top is lightly toasted.