

P.S.

THE POET T. S. Eliot wrote: "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons". Many readers will share the sentiment with him; most of the people at my office seem to. Coffee has become the most commonly consumed beverage in the Western world, replacing tea as the *de facto* drink of the English, for instance. Chains such as Starbucks and Tim Horton's have revolutionised the consumption of coffee and the price that can be charged for it! Many feel that they can't function properly without their caffeine kick to get them through.

Coffee makes me ill; if I want to avoid the shakes I have to confine myself to one cup a day of a weak instant brew. Yet there are other structures and rituals in my life—as I suspect there are for many of us—that serve the same function as T. S. Eliot's coffee spoons. For me it's a scone from the work canteen at about 9.15 in the morning and a bar of chocolate in the afternoon—not to mention numerous trips to the water fountain and a bacon sandwich and hash browns on a Friday morning—which combine to give me a sense of comfort and place, the feeling that I shall be able to make it through the working week. People need to break up their activities with familiar routines, activities which make them feel warm and secure. They need to look forward to little treats to relieve the tedium of their activities.

But is the coffee spoon—or whatever the equivalent crutch might be for you or for me—really the best way to mark time, to break down and measure out our lives, or to make us feel warm and at home? Is life really about surviving the abyss between one cup of coffee and the next? Well, of course, no one would claim that it was, in quite that way. But that doesn't mean there isn't an interesting topic here to consider.

If poets and office workers mark out their lives with coffee spoons, then it is worth considering the contrast with Abraham. Abraham marked out *his* life with altars; it seems that everywhere he went he erected one and called on the name of the Lord. Throughout his life, the Lord constantly came to him to impart or reiterate a message. The constant 'interruptions' of the Abraham narrative while God says something to His friend yet again are one of this

Coffee spoons

part of Genesis' most characteristic features. Just think how many times the promises are either restated or expanded upon during the ten or so chapters about Abraham. This, surely, was how Abraham would have measured his life, and how he would have felt his sense of warmth and place in the arms of God. Abraham's life was a consistent conversation with God; indeed, it wouldn't seem to be going too far to say that the actual events of his life were more like interruptions to that conversation than the other way round.

The life of Daniel provides a similar exhortation. Daniel's spiritual counterpart to the coffee spoon was his thrice daily facing of Jerusalem and the lifting of his thoughts to God in prayer. *This* was the routine that marked his day, that provided comfort and hope, and that enabled his survival in a place that was potentially a spiritual wilderness for him.

So, while it may be true that human beings are helped by physical habits that give a sense of familiarity and belonging—crutches to aid the walk of life—the principle is even more true and even more important in a spiritual sense. Cups of tea, ten minutes with the newspaper, a morning muffin from our favourite shop, are all very well. But it is even more important to have the spiritual equivalent. If a coffee helps in the survival of a set of difficult meetings or the compilation of an awkward report, and if a cake rewards for answering cantankerous emails or a tedious trip to the shops, then how much more valuable is time spent in prayer, in listening to God's voice, or in meditation?

Daniel's prayers, and Abraham's altars and conversations with God, were not inconvenient interruptions to the rest of their lives. They were instead what made the rest of life worth living. Each of us needs to think about building into our lives habits and structures which will keep us warm and filled in a spiritual sense. It is the spiritual conversation we are having with our heavenly Father throughout the course of our lives that is the most important thing and the thing we should cherish. Good habits can help to make that conversation more real and more powerful as we walk in His sight.

Mark Vincent