

Locusts and wild honey, or chocolate-covered grasshoppers?

Locusts and wild honey doesn't sound like a very appetizing diet. I suppose some people have eaten chocolate-covered grasshoppers, but I haven't been brave enough to try that. And I know there are cultures that regularly dine on certain insects as staples in their diet (plenty of protein, I'm told). You have a hard enough time convincing me to eat vegetables.



This tree's pods might have been the source for the "locusts" in John the Baptist's desert diet.

For that reason the Scripture we heard last Sunday (and that we hear at least every three years in Advent) about John the Baptist's unusual sartorial habits and dining choices always gave me pause. My natural response was: Itch. And: Ick.

John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said: A voice of one crying out in the desert, Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. John wore clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. (Mt 3:1-6)

The great thing about our pilgrimage to the Holy Lands of Israel and Jordan were the way the trip opened up the Scriptures in ways previously blocked. We saw the Jordan River, probably the spot where John did his baptizing. What was at that time a rushing river is barely a stream now, but it was still impressive to be in that holy place. But it was not just the places but the bits of trivia that made the Scriptures come alive.



Msgr. Art Valenzano holds a dried seed pod, the food that might have been the “locusts” in John the Baptist's desert diet.

At Sephora, in Galilee, the place believed to be the home of Joachim and Ann (parents of Mary, and grandparents of Jesus), we saw a tree whose pods were drying in the October sun. Our guide happened to mention that these were likely the “locusts” that John ate, when Matthew talked of him eating “locusts and wild honey.” Although some versions of the Bible actually translate that passage as “grasshoppers,” the guide said that the dried pods looked somewhat like locusts and rattled or chirped like locusts when scattered on the ground. When chewed, the pods and the seeds in them gave off a vaguely cocoa-like smell and taste, he said. (Could this be where the idea for chocolate-covered grasshoppers came from?) In any case, such a plant could well have sustained a hermit in the desert, especially one aiming for a simple life, as John did.



Msgr. Art Valenzano sniffs a dried seed pod, the food that might have been the “locusts” in John the Baptist's desert diet.

While the revelation demystified the Baptist somewhat, it doesn’t change his heroic effort or his message. Whether he was eating grasshoppers or seed pods, he lived a humble life in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Savior. Through his baptism of Christ in the Jordan, salvation history takes the next step.

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