

Our Daily Bread

Matthew 6:7-13

Jesus knew the insecurity of the rich in His day and time – knew that they – like the poor – were but dogs dancing to the hunting master's whip – for Rome – was the master with the whip. Imperious Rome. Jesus knew also the hunger of the people of the land – so scarce was bread, that hundreds would follow him all day with empty stomachs, not a loaf or a fish to their names for the next meal. He knew too that for rich and poor – together – the end of their civilization – their whole way of life – was perilously near – it was later than they thought. They would soon have to evacuate Jerusalem, he said, flee together in confused terror before the destruction of the city – he only hoped their flight he said – would “not be in winter.” Yet within the lifetime of 50% of those who knew and heard this Jesus – the blow fell, and Jerusalem lay in ruins - a garbage heap – of palaces and hovels – razed – crumbled together – with refugees on the roads – and Jerusalem empty except at night when the little foxes - as in the days of Nehemiah - danced on the rubble and barked at the moon.

So Jesus knew that he was talking about – out of harsh experience – when he taught his disciples to pray and say – “give us this day our daily bread.” It was all you could ask for and the only day you could be sure of. It was a prayer out of insecurity – taught by one who - though the birds of the air had nests and the foxes had holes – had “not where to lay his own head” – a prayer out of real need. “Give us this day our daily bread” – it said – just seven English words – yet all a human being can ask for in this world where absolute security ever has been and ever will be a myth – all the provision and protection a person can expect – not “our Father in heaven – give us a lifetime guarantee” – no – never – just – “Give us this day – our daily bread.” No more – God, no less – God. Just day to day bread. Honest – humble – simple words it takes no scholar to plumb them – just an honest heart.

But they say a lot – listen: in the first place – it says – “Give us this day our daily bread” – GIVE – give – give to us! Just tell me just how much in this world do we earn or deserve? Oh, yes, we're expected to work for our keep, labor “like the ant” – but let us not be cocky and boastful over our rather puny accomplishments – ever see a swaggering ant? – for when you come right down to it where did the mind, the muscle, the sense of responsibility we have to do our work – where did it come from? From God, through our inherited capacities, through our family training and our community. Of course, we've put them all to use – but basically they are a gift - or we say so and so is “gifted” – we're all gifted – so let us be humble! Only a fool

brags about gifts. And another thing, the prayer says "Give us this day our daily bread" and not "Reward us according to our just deserts." If our Father in heaven did that – the biggest saint here in this sanctuary would – I suppose – starve to death. One thing you can put in your pipe and smoke it – God doesn't give owe us anything – so in the midst of problems and pains – it ill behooves us to yelp "What have I done to deserve this? It would be better to plead "Oh, Lord, these are my just deserts, I know, so give me courage to endure and intelligence to learn from and find a way out of - if it be Thy will."

So "Give us" – reminds us that we are not God - there are still some things in life we can't earn on merit – we just have to ask for – we must still plead like children – no matter how educated we are, how well heeled we are, how powerful we think we are – there always comes a time – maybe in a hospital bed or in the face of some difficulty – some private hell – when we have to remember our childlike venerability – our inability to supply our own basic needs – so "give us", Lord – Give us what our money can't buy and our minds cannot attain – forgiveness, faith, hope, love – daily bread. It puts us in our proper place to have to say "Give us" something.

And the second word is "us." Not "give me." "Give us." Life is a cooperative venture – we don't and can't go it alone. "After this manner therefore pray ye" – in the plural – "give us" – "forgive us" – "deliver us" – "our Father."

Daily bread is certainly a cooperative attainment – one or two well-placed inter – continental ballistic missals - to disrupt this highly complicated, interlocking system of security we have here in America – and most of would starve to death searching the rubble of the grocery stores - and polluted gardens – and the rest of us would stay alive only by utmost cooperation.

Neither religion nor life allow you to be an island unto yourself. "No man is an island." Said John Donne and he was right. Shut yourself off from the Lord or from people - and you're lost. Two hundred years ago – it was believed that witches said the Lord's prayer backward – I rather doubt that – but if you want to be a witch of a woman or a devil of a man today - say it in the first person singular. It sounds horrible. Said like this: "I who am on the earth, hallowed be my name. My kingdom come, my will be done, for there is no heaven. I must fight this day for my daily bread. I neither forgive nor am forgiven. I fear not temptation, for I deliver myself to temptation and from evil. For mine is the kingdom and the power – and – as far as I am concerned there is no glory and no forever – Amen." That's a - sad and sick – wicked way to live. Take community out of religion and out of life – refuse to say

“our Father” and “give us” – and what you have left is sterile cynicism, bitter loneliness – a witch – in short: hell.

I remember a man who lay dying in agony, not because of the pain but because he suddenly realized, too late, that what he had always termed “mine, mine” was really “ours, ours.” Try as he might – he could not keep it, in the final moment, from slipping through his fingers back where it belonged all along. He kept babbling something about “They – they will get it now and they’ll throw it all away – they, they – he never learned to say “us.” “Give us this day our daily bread.”

Third, the prayer says – “this day” – that’s what Christ even taught his disciples – to live one day at a time – God never yet gave a man or woman strength for two days at a time – but “as thy days (one at a time) so shall thy strength be.” This much only can we count on – one day at a time. No one day will ever dawn that we can’t deal with by grace. We’ll never make it if we keep hauling along our yesterdays with all their mistakes and missed opportunities – and all our tomorrows with their possible problems and pains. Of course we must learn from yesterday and we must plan for tomorrow – but we only live today. It’s the only life – the only real time we have. The rest is only memory and dream. Yet we all know people who try to live so much in their past or in their future – they are scarcely aware of where or how they are today. The young – too much in the future – “one of these days” – the old – too much in the past – “used to be” people. If you want any happiness or peace now – live one day only – not two days since the creation have ever yet been just alike. So why spoil the gift of a day – a gift that never has been ours before – and never will be ours again? A day is like a jewel in the hand – why throw it away? In fact – when the count down comes (ends?) you’d give away all your jewels for just one more beautiful day. Give us – then each day – one day at a time – then what? Our daily bread – not a lifetime of robust health – not a high level of luxury – not a continuous 6-ring circus – but just “our daily bread” – i.e. – give us contentment in simplicity. Give us – one day at a time – food for the body and food for the soul. Today, may we lack for neither. Today, may we have an appetite for both.

Of course, to be contented with simplicity – isn’t easy – not where good for the body is concerned – for we live in a time of extravagance, in an economy geared to waste – we, our children, our young people, want so much and measure success in terms of amount accumulated and it isn’t easy to be contented with simplicity where food for the soul is concerned either – for we live in a day that trusts mental gymnastics – instead of love, the utilitarian rather than the heroic, and with the obvious failure of humanism, we are left without any faith in something better than ourselves to lift us out of ourselves and bind us together, so we remain as “attached as

tumbleweed,” in “...this stupid world where gadgets are gods and we go on talking...” (W. H. Auden, The Age of Anxiety)

But – do you know what? – every age is the same – Jesus himself lived in a country occupied by more than Roman forces – it too was occupied with greed and fear – men and women without God always have been and always will be – greedy and frightened.

So the prayer He tried to teach them – before it was too late – too late – a prayer by which they were to learn to live on the simplest fare and with the simplest faith – applies also to us – in our world of anxiety and anger.

“O – our Father – in heaven – you give to us this our daily bread – for the body and the soul of us – and thine be the glory – forever. Amen”