

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**(and Reflection for service on Zoom)**

**1<sup>st</sup> August 2021**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

I wonder what you pray for when you say the words 'Give us this day our daily bread.' It may surprise you (or it may not) that the church has never quite agreed on what they mean.

The word used for 'daily' in the original Greek language of the New Testament was a rare word that meant 'special', or maybe 'spiritual'. When the text came to be translated into Latin by St Jerome, he used two different translations of the Greek word in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer spoken by Jesus refers to 'special' or 'spiritual' bread, and Luke's version to 'daily [ordinary, everyday] bread'. It was the second version that prevailed when the prayer came to be used in the Roman Church, and we have gone on using the word 'daily' ever since.

This movement from a 'spiritual' to a 'bodily' focus in this sentence of the Lord's Prayer can also be seen at the time of the Reformation in the writings of Luther and Calvin. Partly in the wake of a series of crop failures in Europe at the time, a greater urgency to the physical aspect of the prayer developed. Martin Luther

famously drew up a list to explain the range of meaning which he understood the expression 'daily bread' to include: 'food, drink, clothes, shoes, houses, farms, fields, lands, money, property, a good marriage, good children, honest and faithful public servants, a just government, favourable weather, health, honours, good friends, loyal neighbours'. The twentieth century theologian Karl Barth commented that Luther's list belonged to the farming bourgeoisie of 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany and had moved a long way from the simple reference to 'bread' in Christ's teaching. Yet Barth agreed that it was right to interpret 'daily bread' in terms of what each generation needs for its survival and wellbeing. In an extended meditation on the Lord's Prayer published last year<sup>1</sup>, Stephen Cherry suggested we might think of the prayer as simply saying: 'Give us enough for now', Give us what we need 'for today'.

That emphasis on 'today' reminds us – as it would have reminded Jesus's hearers - of the story of the manna in the wilderness, one of the defining passages in the Old Testament, which we heard this morning. The people of God, recently liberated from slavery in Egypt, are travelling in the wilderness. They are hungry and start complaining they would have been better off staying in Egypt where at least they had food. They then find that in the evening they are feasting on quails and in the morning on bread in the form of manna from heaven. The amount of manna they received was exactly enough for each day – neither too much nor too little. If they tried to hoard it, it went mouldy. They had to trust that the next day they would be given more.

The story of the manna offers a profound message for us about abundance and scarcity. Think for a moment how much of our anxiety is about scarcity.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Cherry, *Thy Will be Done*, Bloomsbury (2020).

Throughout the pandemic we have been made to feel anxious about it – scarcity of masks, personal protective equipment for healthcare staff, hospital beds, medicines, vaccine doses, food in shops. We spend much of our time trying to convince ourselves we are self-sufficient by fending off scarcity. But the wisdom of these holy texts reminds us that we should, instead, trust in the abundance of a loving Creator, not give in to feelings of panic. Jesus taught his disciples to consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, and stop being eaten up by worry.

This is also the context of our Gospel reading today. The passage from St John comes the day after the account of the feeding of the five thousand. The crowd follow Jesus round the Lake of Galilee, presumably hoping to be fed again. We don't know much about the people who followed Jesus, but for many of them the source of the next meal would likely have been a matter of anxiety. There is an obvious parallel in this episode with the ancient Israelites journeying through the wilderness in need of food.

Jesus challenges his hearers to look beyond their immediate needs, and to develop an attitude of mind and heart that will actually help them deal with whatever life brings. 'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food which endures for eternal life.' His hearers, realising that he is talking about religion, and picking up on the word 'work', ask him what they must do 'to perform the works of God'. The reply is simple: 'Believe in him whom [God] has sent.' But the crowd respond with a challenge: Give us a sign so that we may believe. Perhaps still hoping for another meal, they refer to the sign of their ancestors being given manna in the wilderness. And it is at this point that Jesus's true significance is disclosed. He says to them: 'It was not Moses who gave you

the bread from heaven, but my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven'. Notice how the past tense becomes present. The crowd were looking to the past to offer them a sense of security for the future. But Jesus encourages them to think beyond the past: to remember not just what God had done but what God has promised to do. And then he says the words: 'I am the bread of life.'

This is the first of the seven sayings in the Fourth Gospel that begin with the words 'I am'. 'I AM' in the Old Testament was the name given to God himself. The Gospel writer is saying: this is it, there is nowhere further to look, it is the end of all our desiring. All our hopes and fears are met in this. The mysterious presence of God, which is all we need. The Father sending the Son so that humanity may experience the fullness of God. Christ is the bread of life, the true manna, the ultimate provision for us in life and in death. God in Christ is the comfort we need to walk in faithfulness through our earthly lives, and also the gift that promises eternal life with God. The Holy Spirit provides the power for us to glimpse and grasp these things in faith, and share them with others.

In our Gospel, Jesus teaches his hearers that the feeding of the five thousand was temporary, but what he is offering is permanent. A spiritual awareness that can help us feel completely different about how we live. A life where fear of scarcity turns into a sense of abundance. One that enables us to create a sense of abundance for one another too. Because no prayer for bread for ourselves can be complete without a hunger for justice for others. That they may have relief from famine and food inequality, a transformation of scarcity by whatever means we have at our disposal.

Karl Barth was at ease with the fact that 'bread' has a dual meaning in the Scriptures. For him, it is both sustenance for today and promise for tomorrow. The reality of physical food, aligned with the desire for justice, and at the same time the sign of 'God's eternal grace'. Whoever comes to Christ will never be hungry. Like the Samaritan woman at the well, whom Jesus assures that the water he will give will become in her 'a spring of water gushing up to eternal life'.

So for Barth, and for us, the prayer for 'daily bread' is not a question of either-or. We don't have to choose between asking for bodily or spiritual sustenance. It is both-and. He writes that what the prayer is saying is this:

'Give us this minimum which is necessary for the present moment; and, at the same time, give it to us as a sign, as a pledge anticipating our whole life. According to your promise, which we are receiving at this moment, we receive also the presence of your eternal goodness, the assurance that we shall live with you.'

That's quite a prayer. It's why we use it every day.

Amen.