

Studies on the Lord's Prayer

4. Give us today our daily bread...



We throw a lot of bread away in our house. It's a terrible admission – but there it is. We eat some of it, but then the remainder in the pack always seems to end up going mouldy before we've finished it. Partly it's because we all like different sorts of bread. Rector's Daughter likes the sliced white plastic stuff that hardly seems to have any actual bread in it. Whereas I prefer the stuff you have to slice yourself, and which threatens to remove your teeth when you chew on it. But partly it's because we just don't eat a lot of bread. There are so many other things to eat

alongside it or instead of it.

But for thousands of years bread has been the basic staple food of the western world—from the Middle East, across North Africa, Europe, and all those parts of the world duly colonized by European countries. In the Far East, of course, it's different. There the main crop, and the main foodstuff, has always been rice, which throws up some interesting questions about what Jesus might have taught his disciples to pray had he done so in Beijing or Hanoi.



But for us it is bread. A simple mixture of flour and water, the option of adding a bit of yeast and salt, and then apply heat. And voila! After just a short time we have a solid, substantial and nutritionally rich food which can be eaten at any time of day and in all sorts of different forms—toast, sandwiches, hunks to dip into soup or mop up gravy. Cheap, simple, filling and good for you.



Mrs Beeton knew all about the value of bread. Here's what she has to say in her bestselling *Book of Household Management*: '... bread has become an article of food of the first necessity; and properly so, for it constitutes of itself a complete life-sustainer, the gluten, starch, and sugar, which it contains, represents azotised and hydro-carbonated nutrients, and

combining the sustaining powers of the animal and vegetable kingdoms in one product.' So there you are! ('Azotised'? Anyone know what that means?)

Bread is definitely good for you – as part of a balanced diet no doubt. And for many societies across the world and across history, bread has been at the centre of our diet, being affordable even by the poor whose acquaintance with cake has often been slender.

So perhaps it's not surprising that bread has assumed a much wider social and emotional significance, way beyond its merely nutritional value. We still speak of someone who secures the family's economic well-being by whatever means as a 'breadwinner', while 'bread' itself (or, sometimes, 'dough') continues to serve as



a colloquial synonym for 'money'. And, although our own language obscures the association, our companions or those whose company we keep are those with whom we eat bread – *com panis*. And as that which keeps the wolf from the door and us from starvation, nourishes us and ensures healthy growth, as well as being enjoyable, 'bread' has also assumed a widespread symbolic

significance for anything that gives and sustains life and facilitates healthy growth and development.

But we can't escape the more basic level of consideration for long. Whether it's bread, or rice, or corn, or some other staple food, our bodies need it, and we are designed in such a way that we can't do without it for long. Otherwise grumbling stomachs quickly turn to grumbling of a more articulate sort, like that of the Israelites in the wilderness (see Exodus 16), who berated Moses for taking them out into the wilderness where the opportunities for grabbing a sandwich, grazing from the fridge, or ordering a pizza were relatively few.



God responded to the Israelites' complaining by blessing them with manna, a breadlike substance which appeared each morning on the ground in sufficient quantity to keep them all satisfied. It was their 'daily bread', and even though ours typically comes from less mysterious sources, that story from the Old Testament lies behind Jesus' teaching that we too in our regular pattern of prayer should petition our Father in heaven to 'give us today our daily bread'.

But just what sort of prayer is that? The Lord's Prayer, it seems, includes in its scope the whole panoply of human life. The greatest of things, and the smallest of things. The most exalted of concerns and the most basic of concerns. The profoundly spiritual and eternal and the almost embarrassingly material and bodily.

We've just been praying for the hallowing of God's name, and the coming of God's kingdom on earth – the great religious themes of Scripture. And here we are now it seems with the equivalent of the shopping list scribbled hurriedly on an old envelope before dashing out to Morrisons or Aldi: 'milk, teabags, a jar of



marmalade ... oh – and mustn't forget daily bread...'. Isn't there an incongruity about it? Isn't this a concern much too trifling, too petty, too mundane to bother God with, when there are so many other, bigger and more urgent matters of the soul to deal with?

When you pray, pray like this, Jesus tells his disciples. 'Our Father in heaven ... give us today our daily bread'.

So it would seem not. It would seem that even something as down to earth and routine and trivial as the day to day grocery shopping is legitimately embraced within the scope of this disciples' prayer, to be prayed not just once but daily, and perhaps several times a day. God, it would seem, is just as interested in the trifling and the mundane as he is in the profound and the things of eternal consequence.

Perhaps, though, that ought not to surprise us. After all, God has made us to be the sorts of creatures we are: creatures with bodies, immersed in a world of material realities and conditions, and for whom what at first glance may seem trivial and trifling can quickly assume far more urgent and all-absorbing significance, especially if we are deprived of them for any length of time.



We cannot, as the sorts of creatures we are, concern ourselves *solely* with great ideals or exalted spiritual truths. And only those whose material needs are well provided for, and whose bodies are at least comfortable, could ever suppose it to be otherwise. Lack of concern for our daily bread, its provenance and its whereabouts, is a privilege of those who have plenty (and probably far more than they need), and who entertain no uncertainties about their supply continuing uninterrupted.

We human beings are creatures of flesh and blood, whose well-being and enjoyment of the world God has made and placed us in are bound up from first to

last with some very basic and mundane concerns, even if we dress them up to look more sophisticated and genteel than they really are: a fire to warm ourselves by; a coat or covering to preserve our warmth; sufficient to eat and drink, to keep, as they say, ‘body and soul together’. When it comes down to it, most of the accumulation of material ‘stuff’ that we in our society spend so much of our time acquiring and desiring and taking to the recycling centre or charity shop so that we can acquire more is simply a variation or elaboration or unhealthy growth on the surface of these few very basic needs—the things beings like us cannot finally manage without.

And we are compelled to attend to these needs. The life of the mind or the spirit or the emotions cannot soar into the spiritual stratosphere whilever they are left uncared for. Anyone who has tried to think great thoughts (or even just to watch TV) with a raging toothache knows just how important and how non-trifling the needs of our bodies can be! And equally, of course, our bodies are the source of many of the most exquisite pleasures we are able to enjoy as human beings.



So, making proper provision for our several stones of flesh and bone is in reality not a trifling matter at all. It is simply to respect the sorts of creatures God has made us to be, and the sort of place God has made the *world* to be for our indwelling and enjoyment.

Furthermore concern with such things is not beneath God, or unfit as a concern to bother him with in prayer. Not the God who we read about in the Bible, who not only made us as flesh and blood creatures in need of food and shelter and able to enjoy the pleasures of sensuous experience, but who himself ‘took flesh’, and dwelt in our midst, knowing for himself both the pleasures and the pains of bodily existence in the world.



And, as he engages with people in the course of his public ministry, Jesus doesn’t remain aloof from bodily things, but involves himself to the hilt with them—healing a woman whose life has been blighted by an unpleasant perpetual hemorrhaging (it doesn’t get much more down to earth and bodily than that), worrying about the hunger of the crowds who follow him out into the middle of nowhere, and

providing for their needs. Healthy and well-provisioned bodies, it seems, are not a trivial matter at all, but as much a focus of God's concern and care as properly focused and well-fed souls.



And to pray 'Give us today our daily bread' is therefore to acknowledge both that whatever material well-being we enjoy day by day is finally attributable to God's provision for us, and that he is indeed concerned for our bodily flourishing, and with the way we treat our bodies.

But 'give us today our *daily* bread'. Why the emphasis on what we are given *daily*? Partly,

perhaps, because this is a prayer intended to be prayed daily. But I think there's more to it than that.

In the background, as I suggested above, is our reading from Exodus 16, where God provides for the Israelites in the wilderness by sending down manna (which I reckon was probably something a bit like prawn crackers) to eat with the quails which were plentiful, and probably made for a decent ragout for dinner at nights. But although the manna was excessive in its amount, the Israelites were commanded to gather only as much as was needed to feed their families. There was to be no hoarding, no gluttony, and no selling on at a profit. There was enough, and everyone was to have as much as they needed. But no more.



I think in part this was about teaching Israel a lesson about *trusting* God to provide for their material needs. There was no need to grab all the manna today, because there would be more when it was needed tomorrow. God had promised, and Israel must learn to trust that promise. The temptation then, as now and as always, was to grab as much as you could, just in case there turned out to be none available tomorrow or the next day. But God had promised. There was enough, and there would be enough—enough for everyone. But that sufficiency came as part of a relationship in which Israel learned to trust God's promises and to take him at his word. 'Give us today our *daily* bread' is thus an expression of trust of precisely this sort. It keeps us focused on God's promises and his goodness, and on the concerns of the moment (which are more than sufficient), rather than investing ourselves in anxieties about the medium or long-term future.

Secondly, this incident in the wilderness taught Israel too that hoarding and storing, let alone generating a market from which personal profit might be

gained, is not appropriate behavior where God's provision for our material well-being is concerned. Each is to take as much as is required to meet his or her own needs, and those of their immediate family. No less, but no more. And that will ensure that there is more than enough for everyone.

We live, don't we, in a society which encourages us to grab and to get and to hold onto as much as we can for ourselves and (putting the thing in its most altruistic light) for our loved ones. Not to ensure that we and they have *enough*, but that we have the most and the best that we can lay our hands on. And where the acquisition of material wealth is accepted as a convenient index of our success and our 'value' in a much wider sense as a human being. And we are all aware that we live in a society where the haves seem to have ever more, and the have nots to have ever less, the gap between them constantly widening. And that's true not only *within* our society, but *between* societies and nations too. For several centuries now the gap has been growing between what today are called the 'developed' nations of the northern hemisphere and the 'developing' nations mostly south of the equator. And whether we think locally or nationally or internationally, the picture is pretty much the same: those who can are constantly encouraged to grab as many of the world's material resources for themselves as they can, not to meet our needs, but rather to gratify artificially generated and artificially stimulated desires—wants, dressed up as needs. And the resources we need to keep our bodies healthy and comfortable, rather than being available for all to enjoy equally, are grabbed and hoarded by some, and offered back to others at a price they cannot possibly afford. We have largely lost touch with the idea of *sharing* what we have with others, freely and fully; we only want to sell it on, on eBay or Gumtree or somewhere, to make a profit.



It's an unsustainable circumstance as well as an unjust one. And sooner or later it is bound to lead to conflict, as the poor demand their fair share, not having been allowed until now to share anything very much. And it's a circumstance driven by an underlying conviction that there's not enough to go around, and what there is is rapidly being snapped up or used up, so I'd better get whatever I can while I can. So we rush around in a feeding frenzy of material consumption, rather than taking time to enjoy what God has given us, and to enable others to share in that enjoyment insofar as we have access to its resources.

God may be concerned for our bodily well-being. God may care about our needs of food and clothing and shelter, and desire us to enjoy the good things that our bodies make it possible to enjoy—experiences of sight and sound, taste and smell, and touch. God may intend us to savour all of that. But God does not sanction gluttony or greed, and what we have freely received from his hand he does not expect us to grab with both hands and then offer to others at an extortionate mark-up that they cannot afford.



The story of the manna tells us that God has provided and provides and will provide *more than enough* for everyone. He is a God of plenty and of blessing and of enjoyment: and he shares what he has freely with us that all may enjoy its bounty.

But not everyone has enough. In fact, even in our supposedly developed and technologically sophisticated world, many lack their daily bread, or water unpolluted by organisms that kill, or shelter in the face of extreme weather that kills the body. There is more than enough – unless and until some grab more than their fair share and hoard it.

And we cannot pray ‘give us today *our* daily bread’, without being aware of the millions in our world didn’t have bread yesterday, have none today, and (unless we do something about it) probably won’t have any tomorrow either. And we can’t pray it either without being aware of our complicity in the circumstances of their lack—that in some (no doubt complicated rather than simple, but nonetheless real) sense our having much *more* than our daily bread is linked to their not having enough, and places a responsibility upon us. Once again, we are in effect part of the answer to our own prayer. And to pray ‘give us today our *daily* bread’ is in effect to repent of that complicity, and to commit ourselves to do *whatever we are able to do* to challenge iniquitous systems and institutions, and to share whatever we can of whatever we have out of the plenty that God has made available not just for us, but for all.



So, it turns out that our mundane, bodily needs are wedded naturally enough to ‘big thoughts’ after all, because our active involvement in the material world involves us with other people, and with their needs and hopes and desires.

There is another layer of meaning yet, though, to be had from biblical mention of bread. And, while God is certainly concerned that our bodies should be healthily fed, and able to enjoy the pleasures of eating which the world makes available to us, Jesus also teaches the crowds not to invest themselves in obtaining 'the food which perishes', but to seek instead 'the food which endures to eternal life' (John 6.27).

There is, I think, more than one thing going on here. First, even when we pray quite literally and properly for 'our daily bread', it's important that in praying it we don't lose sight of the nature of this provision as a *gift*, nor (more



importantly) lose sight of the Giver! It's fine to want the bread and to ask for it; but it's better still to want to receive it from God's hand, and so enjoy receiving it as God enjoys giving it, as part of our continuing relationship with him, which is born of his love and endures to eternal life.

Then, too, there is the symbolism in which Jesus links his own presence and action to

'living bread' (John 6). 'I am the bread of life' he tells them. 'Anyone who eats this bread will never die, but live eternally. Because I am the living bread which comes down from heaven to satisfy even the most prodigious appetite, and to ensure your growth and development not just in the lives of your mortal bodies, but in that *fullness* of life, life in all its fullness, eternal life, which is and always has been my Father's plan for you'.

The symbolism isn't too difficult for our imaginations to grasp. Just as bread is vital to our survival, and to the healthy growth and development of our bodies,

so Jesus is essential to our enjoyment and growth and development where 'life in all its fullness' is concerned. And we need to feed on him, to be nourished by him constantly if we are to have this life and to enjoy it.



Of course, that's where it gets a bit more difficult. We all know how to get our teeth around a peanut butter sandwich or a decent hunk of toast and marmite. But how do we, so to speak, 'get our teeth around' Jesus?! 'I am bread,' he says. 'So eat me. Because if you don't you won't have the fullness of life that I bring and sustain, because no one and nothing else can bring it or sustain it. So eat me!'

And the crowds say, 'Er, okay Jesus. But this is a bit of poetic symbolism right? I mean, we don't *actually* have to, er, you know, *eat* you?' Well, fortunately not. Jesus isn't advocating cannibalism. But whatever 'eating' here *does* mean, it's clearly not an option, or something we can afford not to do.



It's been said that the Christian gospel is like one starving man discovering food, and showing his starving friends where to find it. 'Eat me', says Jesus. So, what exactly does 'eating' Jesus, or 'feeding on' him mean? Well, it's not really as difficult as it might sound. It's nothing particularly esoteric (though no doubt it goes far beyond what we can grasp of it). But we can grasp its basics, and Jesus has already gestured towards them earlier in the passage.

'Believe in me' he says. 'Believe in me, and believe in the things I say and do. And believe in the one who sent me. Come to me, and follow me. And you will have life within you. Not just the biological life which is born, and grows, and then gradually begins to fade and wither (and its teeth to fall out), and eventually dies to make room for other things to be born and to grow. But fullness of life; life in all its fullness—here and now, and then, when this fleeting life is over, an *enduring* life in my presence, and the presence of my Father, in the new creation which he has promised. Believe in me. And I will raise you up on the last day.'

Finally, we shouldn't forget that the kingdom of God is frequently pictured in the Bible as bound up with the enjoyment of food – lots of food in fact! So Isaiah envisages the coming kingdom as an occasion on which 'the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well aged wines' (Isa 25.6). God's kingdom is not to be a solemn, grey place in which 'redeemed souls' drift around forever, wishing they had their bodies back so that they could have a bit of fun. On the contrary, it is pictured as a place of partying, of feasting and



celebrating and generally having a great time! And when Jesus attends parties, and tops up the wine at a wedding threatening to run dry, he is already gesturing to the 'mother of all parties' that will happen when God's kingdom is ushered in.

So, 'give us today our daily bread' is a prayer that has its

sights fixed on several things at once. It is a prayer for the food we need to sustain our bodies. It is a prayer in which we commit ourselves to sharing our plenty with others less fortunate than ourselves. It is a prayer that has its sights set on Jesus, and on the eucharist in which we eat bread and drink wine together

as a way of 'feeding on' him and being nourished by him spiritually. And it is a prayer which already anticipates the feasting and celebration of the kingdom of God. Quite a lot crammed into just a few words!

Questions for reflection and/or discussion:

1. How can we take more seriously the fact that God is concerned about our material well-being, and that of our fellow human beings?
2. Which aspects of our worship (if any) reflect the importance of our bodies in our relationship with God?
3. How might we develop ways of worshipping that reflect this importance more fully?
4. Can you think of some practical ways in which we might seek to learn from the experience of the Israelites with the manna?
5. How do you respond to the idea of the kingdom of God being like a huge party?