



St Marylebone
Parish Church

I am the Bread of Life

Trinity 11 2018 11 am

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every three years, the 'world cup of dough' is held in Paris.

The *Coupe du Monde de Boulangerie* is, what it says on the loaf tin, 'the world cup of baking' and, in the presence of no less a guest than the President of the French Republic, the prize went in 2016 not to the French, as one might expect, but to the South Koreans.

Although sales of bread in the UK have fallen by 40% since 1974, bread - or at least smart bread - is still big business - at least, as Marylebone High Street testifies.

Yet, despite the best efforts of the high-priests of bread,

Mary Berry, Paul Holywood and their acolytes, our real, daily, hands-on connection with bread has long since been left behind. As the priest poet David Scott has written,

*We have come so far from bread.
Rarely do we hear the clatter of the mill wheel;
see the flour in every cranny,
the shaking down of the sack, the chalk on the door,
the rats, the race, the pool,
baking day, and the old loaves:
cob, cottage, plaited, brick.*

*We have come so far from bread.
Once the crock said 'BREAD'
and the bread was what was there,
and the family's arm went deeper down each day
to find it, and the crust was favoured.*

*We have come so far from bread.
Terrifying is the breach between wheat and table,
wheat and bread, bread and what now goes for bread.
Loaves come now in regiments, so that loaf
is not the word. Hlaf
is one of the oldest words we have.ⁱ*

If it is true that we have come 'a long way from bread', and that we have indeed lost our deep hands-on 'connectedness' with the softness of milled flour, the grittiness and pungency of yeast and the heat of the oven, how much truer is it that we have lost the deep connectedness between Jesus saying that he is 'bread' and our prayer to God to 'give us our daily bread' as we cry out for God's Kingdom to come?

The Lord's Prayer, given by Jesus, through his disciples, to the world has, to a large extent, become bankrupt and irrelevantⁱⁱ. Its once urgent petitions have now, largely, lost their meaning, and not just for those outside the Church but within.

Over two thousand years of constant use, the words of the Lord's Prayer have become increasingly distorted and misunderstood, eviscerated of their urgency and power.

Whilst the prayer has everything that needs to be said - about God, the Kingdom, this life - it is a prayer whose petitions we need to rediscover afresh over and over again.

Jesus left us only one prayer in response to his disciples' request that he teach them how to pray and,

at every moment of every day, somewhere in the world, someone prays the prayer once used by Christ himself and ask for 'daily bread', but, all too often, the words simply glide over our tongues, untouched, untasted and forgotten as quickly as they are uttered.

But back to bread, or rather, back to praying for our 'daily bread' and the distance we have travelled from linking our request for bread to our prayer that God's Kingdom come.

Each of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer is interlinked inexorably: the intimacy of knowing God as Father - with an acknowledgment of God's holiness; the search for the forgiveness of our sins - with our exercise of forgiveness towards those who have sinned against us, and so on.

If we engage in Jesus' work of living the Kingdom, so that God's will is done here on earth as it is in heaven, then we open ourselves up to a most enormous risk; we set ourselves the challenge of living and dying as Jesus lived and died, of living and dying as those who first prayed the Lord's Prayer lived and died.

If we are serious, really serious, about our praying for God's Kingdom to come, and if we truly want God's

will to be done here on earth as it is in heaven, then we must accept that the Kingdom must come through *me*: through *my* actions, through *my* words, through *my* choices.

The 'Kingdom', wrote Alexander Schmemmann, is what lies at the very heart of the New Testament. It is the "core and central understanding, the very nucleus of the gospel message" but it has also become a "riddle, whose answer" seems to have been "lost along the way".ⁱⁱⁱ

If the Kingdom is, as R S Thomas, put it^{iv}, evidenced in,

*Festivals at which the poor man Is king and the consumptive is Healed;
mirrors in which the blind look At themselves and love looks at them Back;
and industry is for mending The bent bones and the minds fractured By life*

then who is to be the agent through whom the consumptive finds healing and through whom dignity is restored to the poor to the poor? Who is going to hold up, before others, the mirror that reflects God's perfect love? Who is it that sets out, consciously, to transform

society in such a way that bent bones are straightened and minds fractured by life are healed?

Teresa of Avila^v knew the answer to the 'riddle'. Teresa knew that *she* had to be the agent of God's Kingdom, the one through whom God's Kingdom would be enacted here and now.

Christ has no body but *mine*,
No hands, no feet on earth but *mine*,
Mine are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Mine are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Mine are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Mine are the hands, *mine* are the feet,
Mine are the eyes, *I* am his body.^{vi}

This is all heady and dangerous stuff. The stuff of revolution, but it is none other than the Way of the Cross.

No wonder then, that we pray that God give us "our daily bread"; that God provides for us all that we need to survive as we go about God's business in the world.

The "bread" for which we pray is not only "bread" nor even food in general, but absolutely *everything*

necessary for life, *everything* which makes possible our existence, *everything* we need to be Christ's hands and feet and eyes as we seek, by and through God's grace, to build the Kingdom, to usher-in the Kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.

Perhaps this is why we choose to glide softly over the petitions of the Lord's Prayer when we pray them; why the words have largely lost their power and meaning for us; for if we really pray *as* Jesus taught us to pray, for *what* Jesus taught us to pray; if we take the words seriously to heart; if we set out to live them and to live by them, we know that we shall find our feet walking the *Via dolorosa* and shouldering the cross to Golgotha.

In this morning's Gospel reading we heard Jesus define himself as 'bread', the 'living bread' that comes down from heaven, the bread which unlike the manna given to the Hebrew peoples as they journeyed to a promised land will never spoil, will never run out; bread that is God of God, that which both *is* at one and the same time that which sustains the Body of Christ in the world and that which enables those who make up that body to be Christ's hands, feet and eyes.

So, Our Father, give us today and every day our daily bread. In and through your love, give us all that we

need to be your body, all that we need live and to build
your Kingdom here on earth as it is heaven, for

*if the bread is holy,
all that has to do with bread is holy:
board, knife, cupboard,
so that the gap between all things is closed
in our attention to the bread of the day^{vii}.*

Amen.

ⁱ *We have come a long way from bread*, David Scott, *Beyond the Drift, New and Selected Poems*, Bloodaxe, 2014

ⁱⁱ Alexander Schmemmann, *Our Father*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.* p. 37

^{iv} R S Thomas, *The Kingdom*, in *Collected Poems, 1945 – 1990*, Phoenix, 1993

^v Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)

^{vi} Italics are mine and replace the third person of the original with the first person of this translation

^{vii} Scott, *op. cit.*