

MATT 6.11: GIVE US TODAY OUR DAILY BREAD

(Chelmsford 10 August 2008)

Yesterday evening I was at the child contact centre BBQ – it was great: there were hamburgers, sausages, spare ribs, together with potato salad and stuff like that – and then we finished with roasted bananas filled with chocolate. Yummy!

But too much food is not good for the figure – nor is it good for one's health.

'For a long life, breakfast like a king; lunch moderately, and dine like a pauper'.

Indeed, Benjamin Franklin once said: *'Three good meals a day is bad living'.*

And yet we have got to eat if we would stay alive.

Jesus recognised this when he taught his disciples to pray: **"Give us today our daily bread"**. Or in the words of the GNB: **"Give us today the food we need"**.

Yes, there is more to life than food.

There are spiritual needs too – and they need to be seen to.

But I find it significant that on the occasion when Jesus spoke of himself as the **'Bread of Life'**, he did so only after he had fed the hungry (John 6).

Our physical needs are important – and God recognises their importance.

For that reason Jesus taught us to pray: **"Give us today our daily bread"**.

What does this the briefest of the petitions in the Lord's Prayer teach us about how we are to pray?

1. PRAY WITH CONFIDENCE

In praying **'GIVE us our daily bread'** we recognise our dependence upon God.

We may plant and water, but it is God who gives the harvest.

William Barclay: *"It is God alone who has the secret of life, and God alone has the gift of making things. Nobody (lit. no man) ever made a living and growing thing. In the most literal sense all food comes from God. The scientist can construct a synthetic seed which will have exactly the same chemical analysis as a real seed; but there will be one all-important difference – the synthetic seed will not grow"*.

We are all dependent on God. In the words of James – God is the giver of every good and perfect gift (Jas 1.17).

True, this doesn't rule out human effort. We have to plant and water.

Or to put it in terms more relevant to us: we must work for our daily bread – we must earn our living. *'God feeds the sparrows'*, it has been said, *'but he doesn't put the crumbs into their mouths'*.

However, the emphasis here is upon God. In preparing for this sermon I read of a group of students who were spending a week in a monastery. At the evening meal, enjoying in silence the wonderful delicious bread, one of the students blurted out: "Hey, did we make this bread or did somebody give it to us?" A monk answered, "Yes".

Yes, God is the great provider. He is a generous giver.

In the words of Psalm 65: **“You show your care for the land by sending rain; you make it rich and fertile. You fill the streams with water, and you provide the earth with crops”** (Ps 65.9).

But God does not just care for the land – he cares for us, he cares for you and he cares for me. Indeed, according to Jesus God can be likened to a heavenly Father.

“Bad as you are”, said Jesus in a little later in the Sermon on the Mount, **“you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him”** (Matt 7.11)

This is why we can come to him with confidence and pray, **“Father,... give us our daily bread”**.

2. PRAY FOR OTHERS TOO

“Give US our daily bread”.

I find it significant that Jesus does not teach us to pray *‘Give me’*.

Yes, of course, when we pray the Lord’s Prayer we are praying for ourselves.

However, the very use of the plural precludes all selfishness in prayer.

We are called to pray for the needs of others.

The needs of others in our church, the needs of others in our world.

We cannot just pray for ourselves. In this respect the Jewish rabbis were right when they said: *“A man should always join himself with the community in his prayers”*.

And in the context of praying for bread, we are called to pray for others who need bread. In particular we are called to pray for the millions who went without bread yesterday, who have none today, and are unlikely to have any tomorrow.

Why is it that some have bread and some do not?

Why is it that God appears to hear the prayers of some and not the prayers of others?

Alas, time and again it is because of our selfishness and our greed.

There is enough food for all, if we will but learn to share.

A reminder therefore that praying the Lord’s Prayer must lead to sharing.

If we are genuine in our praying for others, then we will share with others the bread that God gives us – we will want to share with others the good things that God gives to his children.

3. PRAY ONE DAY AT A TIME

‘Give us today our daily bread’.

In Luke’s Gospel this petition reads: **“Give us day by day the food we need”** (11.3)

Whereas in Matthew’s Gospel the focus is on today – on the present moment.

“Give us today the food we need”. Actually, if you have a GNB in front of you, you will see that there is a footnote which reads: or **“for today”** or **“for tomorrow”**.

The fact is that Matthew uses a very unusual word at this point (*epiousios*).

This is probably the only place in all Greek literature where the word is found. Literally it means: “*of the day that is coming*”. If we pray the prayer in the morning, then we are asking for food for that very day; whereas if we pray the prayer in the evening, then we have in mind, tomorrow’s food.

To understand the petition, we need to bear in mind that in Jesus’ day labourers were normally paid each day for the work they had achieved that day; and the pay was frequently so abysmally low that it was almost impossible to save any of it.

The day’s pay purchased the day’s food.

Jesus was teaching his disciples to trust God for the coming day – to trust God to supply their needs for the present.

I.e. Jesus is encouraging us to live a day at a time.

In words which are found later in the Sermon on the Mount: “**Do not worry about tomorrow**” (Matt 6.34).

Yes, there is a place for saving for a rainy day; yes, there is a place for paying into a pension plan. But we must not allow the future to dominate the present.

As Christians we are not called to worry about tomorrow – but rather we are called to trust God for today. In the words of Margaret Magdalen, a spiritual writer: “*To live provisionally – as those provided for – rules out a nervous attitude to life*”

“**Give us our daily bread**”: i.e. give us bread sufficient for the day.

Don’t look fearfully to the future – but trust God to supply your need.

Or to express the thought in more general terms, don’t worry about the future. Trust God to lead and guide. Or in the words of Donald Coggan, a former Archbishop of Canterbury: “*We don’t ask for provision for the distant future, or for a blueprint of the way we should go in the years ahead. God does not deal with us in that way. He leads us step by step, day by day; and as we **trust** in that way, we find him adequate*”.

Yes, Jesus calls us to live and pray one day at a time.

4. PRAY FOR THE ESSENTIALS

As has often been observed, Jesus teaches us to pray, “**Give us our daily BREAD**”– not, ‘*Give us our daily cake*’.

There is nothing more basic in life than bread.

If you have bread on the table, then we have all that we need.

Jesus does not encourage us to pray for life’s luxuries, but for life’s essentials.

There is no warrant in the Lord’s Prayer for asking for things we would like to have

We might like a new car or a fur coat, but we cannot make such luxuries an object of our praying. Yes, we can thank God for them, but we cannot pray for them.

But the question arises: what are life’s essentials?

Martin Luther said that “**bread**” represents “*everything necessary for the preservation of this life, like food, a healthy body, good weather, house, home, wife, children, good government and peace*”

But I would argue that life's essentials are best defined within the context of the Lord's Prayer itself. For the Lord's Prayer begins by focussing on God and his Kingdom. Tom Wright puts it this way: *"We come to prayer, aware of urgent needs, or at least wants. It's tempting to race through the Lord's Prayer, as far as 'on earth as it is in heaven', so that we can then take a deep breath and say, 'Now look here: when it comes to daily bread, there are some things I simply must have'. And then off we go into a shopping list. To do this, of course, is to let greed get in the way if grace. When that happens, greed defeats its own object. If we don't spend time adoring our Father in heaven, seeking the honour of his name, and praying for his kingdom, all our own desires and hopes will simply present themselves to us in a muddled and jumbled fashion"*

Jesus encourages us to pray for needs, and not for wants – to pray for life's essentials.

5. PRAY FOR THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM

But is that all that Jesus had in mind, when he told his disciples to pray: **"Give us our daily bread"**?

Everything depends upon that little word translated **"daily"**.

Literally, give us the bread **"for the coming day"**. But what is that coming day?

Many scholars would have us believe that Jesus was teaching his disciples to pray for the bread of life which belongs to the Great Tomorrow: i.e. the blessings of the coming Kingdom of God.

You have to remember that in Jewish thinking, the Kingdom of God was often likened to a great wedding feast.

Lord, give us the bread for the great tomorrow.

Lord, may we share in the Feast that is to come!

Frankly, I am far from certain as to whether Jesus had the Kingdom in mind.

But one thing for sure: Jesus was concerned not just for our physical needs, but also for our spiritual needs.

Indeed, Jesus in the context of feeding the 5000 said: **"Do not work for food that goes bad; instead work for the food that lasts for eternal life"** (John 6.27).

Ultimately what counts is not this life, but the life to come.

In a few moments we shall be gathering around the Lord's Table.

As we break bread, we shall remind ourselves of Jesus whose body was broken that we might have life. We shall eat the bread, and as we by faith feed on Jesus, we shall look to the coming of the Kingdom of God, when we together with all God's children shall gather around a new Table of the Lord.

"I am the bread of life", said Jesus. **"He who believes has eternal life"** (John 6.47,48). Yes, let's make the most of life in this world – but let's not miss out on the party that God will throw in the world to come!