

Bread – Matthew 6:11, 15:21-28

Put up your hand if you've eaten bread – or had a piece of toast - this morning.

Bread is a staple in our diet and has been a staple for thousands of years. In Europe, they have found rocks with 30,000-year-old starch residue which they believe was pounded from plants to bake into a primitive form of flatbread. Around 10,000 BCE, making bread began to change the way people lived. Hunting and gathering gave way to communities based around agriculture. And from 5,000 years ago we find the remains of bread loaves in Egyptian tombs and images of how the bread was made.

Even back then – like today - there were various kinds of bread.

Bread is one of the most common foods all over the world, but there are other staple foods...? (Rice, maize and wheat, provide 60 percent of the world's food energy intake.)

Bread is such a significant part of our diet that sometimes use the word 'bread' to all the food that we eat each day. This prominence is reflected in our language, expressions, such as 'being the sole bread winner' and in the construction of words like 'companion' (from Latin 'com' or 'with' and 'panis', 'bread'), someone you share bread – or meals with – and in this prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Bread therefore has a social and emotional significance beyond its importance for nourishment.

I'm about to make a bad preacher's joke – I thought it was fair to warn you – about the kind of bread is Jesus talking about. It is not white or brown bread – but perhaps a kind of gluten-free three c'd bread; the bread of created beings, of contented people, and of compassion.

Because, firstly, the prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread' reminds us of our creaturely dependence on God, that we are created beings, part of God's whole creation.

But how does this understanding that we are dependent on God for our daily needs sit alongside a modern world view that our planet and climate is largely understood and can be controlled or mitigated, while – for most us who live in this society – our understanding of where our food (and other consumables) comes from and the processes it goes through to get to us are so limited?

We watched, for the first time, this week an episode of Dirty Jobs on ABC2, a documentary-style programme that looks at specific production jobs that people do. This episode was about a rice farmer in the United States, and the narrator Mike Rowe was using a fork lift to move a massive bag of rice. Unfortunately, he went a little too fast and the bag tipped, pouring hundreds of dollars of high grade rice onto the ground. The farmer, a remarkably phlegmatic individual, viewing the disaster, said, "Well, well. What are going to do now?" Rowe's response which I think was tongue in cheek, was, "Well, this is usually where the TV crew and I head back to the hotel for beers." What happened, however, was they stayed, worked out how to get the bag of rice of rice upright again, and helped clean up.

As I listen to the news and social commentary it becomes evident to me that our need to acknowledge our dependence on God and our interdependence with the rest of creation

has not diminished; whether it is talk of how more remote relationships between employers and employees have affected the social fabric or how unpredictable weather patterns are impacting the energy industry or how global warming will affect the production of certain food and vegetables, for instance, that carrots may become a luxury, it is appears as important as it ever was that we recognise the God who continues to create our world and looks for 'co-operators (as Rowan Williams says) in the world of human being', that that we stay and help clean up, and that we pray 'give us this day our daily bread'.

You – like me – might be familiar with the grace, "We thank you for this food and the hands that have prepared it," and you might like this version from Norman Vincent Peale, "God, many hands made this meal possible. Farmers grew it. Truckers drove it. Grocers sold it. We prepared it. Bless all those hands, and help us always remember our dependence on you. Amen." (Norman Vincent Peale, *A Prayer for Every Need*)

Secondly praying 'give us this day our daily bread' reminds us to be content with what we have.

Scholars have puzzled over this verse, because the word used here – which is translated – 'daily' is an unusual Greek word, hardly found anywhere else. The most probable meaning is 'the stuff we need to survive'.

In the Common Grace video series, John Dickson, the Australian historian and founder of the *Centre for Public Christianity*, emphasises that this prayer focuses just on the essentials. "The sense here," he says, "is that all I need is daily bread. I don't need long term investments, Lord. It's not give us today our best possible retirement package. It's just daily bread." And he relates this to Old Testament teaching, from Proverbs and elsewhere, where the faithful do not ask for great riches or for poverty, but for God to supply their daily needs.

This prayer, however, is at odds with so much of our culture and the way that we – even in the church live our lives. Dickson comments, "In our grasping culture where we are hardly satisfied with last year's things - we need this year's things - this is a really challenging part of "Give us today our daily bread," because we're saying, "Lord, I'll be content just to live through the day with a full belly, with clothes on my back, with a roof over my head, with friends. That's all I need. Contentment."

It has been said that contentment is about keeping our eyes fixed on God – on that vertical relationship – in which we ask God for our daily needs and thanks God for our daily needs. Lack of contentment causes us to look horizontally – to look at what others have – and then we are never satisfied.

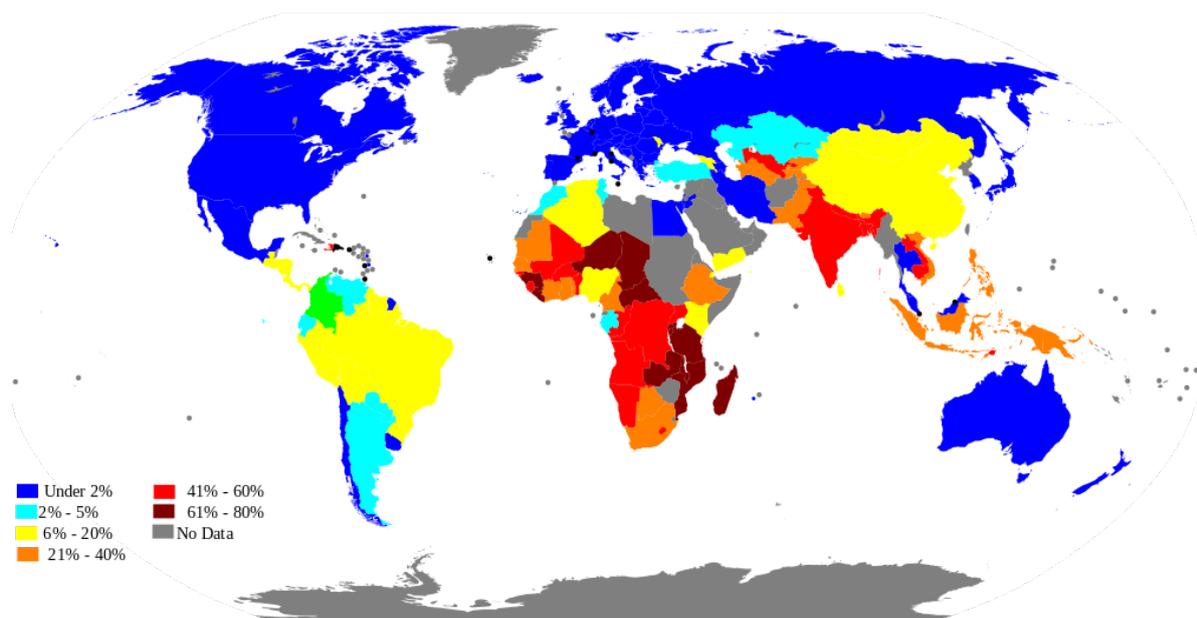
Can we look to God, praying, "Give us this day our daily bread" and exercise this kind of godly contentment?

Thirdly this prayer for bread reminds us to be compassionate.

It is not a prayer just for ourselves but also for others. The words we pray – the pronouns we use are plural – "Give us, our daily bread." When we pray these words, we are praying them for ourselves, and for those we share bread with – our companions – and for others – those we do not consider companions or those whose needs seem so remote that they are our concern.

We live in a world where half of the population are poor – living on less than \$2.50 US a day and a wealthy minority consume most of the ‘bread’ and other resources. The good news is that, in the last few decades, progress has been made. The number of people living in extreme poverty – on less than \$1.90 US a day – has been reduced from 1.85 billion in 1990 to 767 million in 2013. This progress is uneven however. Great progress has been made in East Asia and the Pacific and South Asia, but in Sub-Saharan Africa the number fell only by 4 million - 389 million people still live in extreme poverty with progress hampered by their socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, and geography.

(Code is unclear, but red areas are where 41-60% of the population live in extreme poverty and dark brown where 61-80% of the population live in extreme poverty.)



In our reading this morning a person comes to Jesus and is ignored on the basis of gender (she is a woman), ethnicity (she is a Canaanite) and geography (this is Gentile country).

This is a deeply disturbing story because Jesus here behaves as we ourselves behave, making judgements about others based on our cultural bias. ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,’ Jesus says. And justifying these judgements on the behaviour of the other. “Send her away,” the disciples say, “because she keeps shouting after us.” She is a nuisance.

In this image from *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, a devotional book of hours made by the Limbourg brothers in the early 15th century, we see in the upper panel the woman shouting and calling to Jesus, who has turned away from her; the woman’s daughter is visible through a window on the right.

But in the lower panel, the scene changes. The woman, the text says, gets in Jesus’ face, she comes and kneels before him and begs again, “*Kyrie eleison*”, “*Lord, have mercy*”, the worship language of the faithful. And Jesus engages in dialogue. This is a sign of hope, but the words chosen are harsh. This is the language of cultural rejection, of racial slurs. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

As I was looking at world poverty statistics, I find an ironic parallel with this reading. It was a graph comparing the yearly cost of reducing malnutrition in young children (the cause of 45% of death in children under 5) with the amount of money spent on pets in America.

And the numbers have gone up. Last year Americans spent about \$63 billion on pets (about \$79 billion Aud) (or \$245 per head of population). According to Bob Vetere, the president and CEO of the American Pet Products Association, most of this money went toward more expensive food, and veterinary care, grooming and boarding made up the rest of the spending. Australians are not far behind, however, in fact we are far out in front. Last year we are estimated to have spent more than \$12 billion (\$506 per head of population) on pet products and services. Hate to ask this question, because I am the devoted owner of two adorable dogs, but “Is it fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs?”

But this Cannanite woman – doggedly – stands her ground. She demonstrates an extraordinarily persistent faith; one that transforms her relationship with Jesus (Jesus identifies her ‘great faith’), that results in the healing of her daughter and– it is hard not to come to this conclusion – one that also transforms Jesus’ understanding of the reach of God’s compassion.

Biblical commentator, William Loader, comments is a risky story for the gospel writer to include because it achieves its point at the expense of Jesus’ reputation. But, in his words, “its redeeming feature is its redeeming feature... At its beginning, it is discriminatory. At its end, it affirms the despised.” It celebrates the radical inclusion of women and Gentiles. It celebrates the radical redrawing of boundaries around who we consider our companions, with whom we will share our bread. It is hardly accidental that it is placed between the feeding of the five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand (15:32-39). Stories that speak of the generosity of God’s compassion, the abundant number of God’s companions.

Many years ago, when I worked for an overseas aid and development agency, I met a Catholic aid worker, a priest, who had grown up in Holland...*story about him refusing bread to a German soldier, and then participating in sharing bread with German soldiers at communion...how this changed his view of who our companions are in God.*

As we pray “Give us this day our daily bread” and as we break bread, let us remember that God calls us to redraw boundaries of compassion and companion, that God calls us to be content with what we have so that more can be shared, and that God calls us into the divine work of making heaven and earth and of sharing bread with others.