



Bread For Today

This week we consider the phrase commonly rendered as *Give us this day our daily bread*. Once again, when we consider the different sources of the text for the Abba Prayer we see subtle differences in emphasis depending on how this phrase is worded. ‘Q’ renders the phrase as *Give us the bread we need for today*, Matthew follows this and has the same, whilst Luke has *Give us the bread we need day by*

day (daily). Interestingly, the early texts of the Christian church follow ‘Q’ and Matthew but over the years the phrase has become more akin to Luke’s rendition. Once again, at one level there is no great contradiction or conspiracy at work here, it is simply that Luke, writing for a large Gentile readership has chosen to emphasise the *day by day* or *daily* provision of God when praying for bread. ‘Q’ and Matthew are essentially writing for a Jewish readership and the subtlety of the phrase *Give us the bread we need for today* would not have escaped them. The first image that would spring to mind immediately would be that of their ancestors in the wilderness being fed *manna* (or bread) providentially on a daily bases from the hand of their God. Even though the manna was provided *daily* it is clear that it was only ever sufficient for one day – *the bread we need for today* – and this was made obvious in the story we find in Exodus chapter 16;

When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the desert was something fine and granular, as fine as hoarfrost on the ground. As soon as the Israelites saw this, they said to one another, ‘What is that?’¹ not knowing what it was. ‘That’, Moses told them, ‘is the food which Yahweh has given you to eat. These are Yahweh’s orders: Each of you must collect as much as he needs to eat—a homer per head for each person in his tent.’ The Israelites did this. They collected it, some more, some less. When they measured out what they had collected by the homer, no one who had collected more had too much, no one who had collected less had too little. Each had collected as much as he needed to eat. Moses then said, ‘No one may keep any of it for tomorrow.’ But some of them took no notice of Moses and kept part of it for the following day, and it bred maggots and smelt foul; and Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they collected it, each man as much as he needed to eat, and once the sun grew hot, it melted away¹.

By making this reference it is clear that the central teaching of this phrase is the invitation for us to live in the present moment – in the *Now*. We need not be overly concerned with the future since we must entrust ourselves to it confident that each present day will be filled only with that which we need and no more. This is also echoed in Jesus’ own teaching on not being anxious for tomorrow;

‘That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and what you are to wear. Surely life is more than food, and the body more than clothing! Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they are? Can any of you, however much you worry, add one single cubit to your span of life? So do not worry; do not say, “What are we to eat? What are we to drink? What are we to wear?” It is the gentiles who set their hearts on all these things. Your heavenly Father knows you need them all. Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on God’s saving justice, and all these other things will be given you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow: tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.’²

Jesus takes these images further when in John we read that he talks of himself as the bread of life;

Jesus answered them: I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever hunger; no one who believes in me will ever thirst.³

He makes a direct reference to the provision of manna in the wilderness and himself as God’s provision for humanity. He then continues in language even his followers describe as *intolerable*⁴ referring to his flesh and blood being the bread from heaven that they must consume if they are to have the life of God within them. This is indeed a difficult passage and whilst these words have been interpreted as referring to the Eucharist it is more likely that Jesus is using hyperbole to create an extreme reaction in those he was addressing. He is challenging

¹ Exodus 16.14-21

² Matthew 6.25-27,31-33

³ John 6.35

⁴ John 6.60

their literalism and most likely he is referring to his words and deeds as the flesh and blood of the kingdom. At the end of this discourse he says something that can only be understood as the key to his *intolerable language*;

Jesus was aware that his followers were complaining about [his language] and said, 'Does this disturb you? What if you should see the Son of man ascend to where he was before? 'It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh has nothing to offer. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.'⁵

The bread Jesus brings is the word of eternal life – the flesh and blood of the kingdom. Even Jesus' explanation of this did not stop some of his followers leaving him and choosing not to follow him any further. He asks the twelve if they too will abandon him and Peter answers on behalf of all of them;

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the word of eternal life, and we believe; we have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.⁶

A final link with this concept is found in the words of Jesus when describing the work he had come to carry out;

Meanwhile, the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, do have something to eat'; but he said, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples said to one another, 'Has someone brought him food?' But Jesus said: *My food is to do the will of the one who sent me, and to complete his work.*⁷

Clearly, the imagery of food is about so much more than just bread for our bodies. Of course, the need to have enough to sustain us physically is indeed important and is something that we appropriately pray for. However, this little phrase in the Abba Prayer is about so much more than simply bread for today. It is also about the opportunity to know Christ as our true source of life, the one who has the words of eternal life, the one who will in no way turn us away if we come to feed from him.

In Aramaic the word for bread is *lachma*, which as well as *bread*, is also translated as *understanding*. The sense of the prayer in Aramaic is;

Grant what we need each day in bread and insight:
Substance for the call of growing life⁸

From *lachma* comes the word *hochma*, which translates as *Holy Wisdom* in Proverbs. These nuances would not have been lost on the Aramaic and Jewish Christians, as they prayed, *give us the bread we need for today*, they would have all of these images and meanings foremost in their minds. This part of the prayer is a call to us as much as a request to God. The call for us is that we learn to exercise trust in the provision of God for today; that we learn to live in the present moment rather than in the past or in the future (which for many is so often the case). It is a call to grow in holy wisdom as we gain insight into the ways of the kingdom of God. In the frenetic environment in which we live today we can be easily distracted by the past or the future leaving us somehow detached from the present moment – which is all we can truly know. We can be bound by the chains of the past or hemmed in by anxieties about the future – again, this keeps us from living the abundant life Jesus said that he had come to bring right here, right now.

As a final thought to this study, the word in Aramaic for *give* is *havlan*, which has a broader translation than simply *provide*. It can also be understood as *humanly generate or produce with life and soul*. The wider sense then becomes;

Produce in us, for us, the possible:
Help us fulfill what lies within the circle of our lives:
each day we ask, no more, no less⁹

So, as we pray, *Give us this day our daily bread*, let us be mindful of the richer meaning of what we are asking. We are asking nothing less than to be blessed with the capacity to live in the present moment with complete trust in the God who has made himself known to us in Jesus the Christ – the bread of life. We are making an agreement with the one who supplies our needs to live each day as creatively as we are able in the present moment – each day as a great gift for which we must be eternally grateful.

⁵ John 6.61-64

⁶ John 6.68

⁷ Matthew 4.31-34

⁸ Prayers Of The Cosmos by Neil Douglas-Klotz pg 26

⁹ *ibid*