



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

24th September 2023, 17th Sunday after Pentecost, 4th Sunday of Creation

2 The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3 The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." 4 Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. 5 On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." ... 12 "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.' " 13 *In the evening quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14 When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. 15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. **Exodus 16:2-15***

*13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. 14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15 When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." 16 Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." 17 They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." 18 And he said, "Bring them here to me." 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And all ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. **Matthew 14:13-20***

Sermon: Give us today our daily bread

I have a question about the Lord's Prayer. Every week we pray to God to "give us today our daily bread". What do we mean when we pray that?

Most of us live today with a high degree of food and material security. Even in our cost-of-living crisis, most of us here do not need to worry about where our next meal is coming from. Something to be so thankful for at a time when that's certainly not the case for all. Our supermarket supply chains bring a whole array of nutritious food right to our door, prepacked and ready to consume.

At the risk of sounding blasphemous, for those of us who are privileged enough to be in this position, we don't really need God to give us our daily bread. We know where our next meal is coming from. We're sorted. And so, the petition for God to provide us with food rings a bit hollow.

Maybe therefore, when we ask God to "give us our daily bread", we don't mean it literally. Maybe it is best understood in a spiritual sense. That is, though we are materially catered for, we are asking God to nourish and sustain our soul with "spiritual food".

This interpretation has support from scripture. For example, in John's gospel, Jesus famously describes himself as "the bread of life". Whoever "eats of him", we're told, will have eternal life. Here Jesus is clearly not talking literally, but metaphorically. He is suggesting that, just as bread sustains our bodies, so too his words and life of sustain us spiritually. And this spiritual reality of course is symbolised in the Communion meal. The imagery is incredibly rich and worthy of a sermon or two of its own.

And yet, I'm not sure that a purely "spiritual" reading of the prayer for daily bread is entirely satisfactory. Why? Because while Jesus was concerned about people's spiritual wellbeing before God, he was also undoubtedly very concerned about the material wellbeing of those same people.

In our New Testament reading today for instance, he has compassion on those gathered around him, nourishing not only their souls with his teaching, but providing for their physical needs as well with a full meal. And we're told that "all ate and were filled".

Interestingly, I suspect that, when Matthew told this story about Jesus, he had the Exodus story in mind, because there's a lot of similarities. Just as in Matthew, for instance, we hear in Exodus how a crowd gathers in a deserted place where there is not enough food. And there, just as in Matthew's story, God provides for the physical needs of the people, and they ate their fill. There was more than enough to go around.

I can't resist showing you this fantastic 15th century German interpretation of the story. When anyone else looks at the "bread from heaven" do they see golf balls? It looks to me more like God is creating an almighty mess by firing golf balls everywhere, while an unamused peasantry cleans up after him. But that aside, there is no doubt that what is imagined here is a physical meal. Real food for the belly, not merely immaterial "food" for the soul.

In both our readings today (and I would argue consistently through scripture), God is concerned about our physical wellbeing and sustenance. So, here's the question. What does it mean to pray to God to give us our daily bread in a world where so many do not have enough? Where so many are lacking the basics of life? What does it mean to pray that prayer in a cost-of-living crisis? Or to subvert the question and ask it more directly to most of us here: what does it mean to ask for daily bread when we have more than enough?

...it strikes me in our reading from Exodus that, because there is more than enough, God follows up his promise with a command. This is really important. It's not incidental to the story. It's central to it. His promise is, "I will provide for your daily bread." His command is, "therefore only take what you need for each day." Only take your daily bread. Except on the day before the sabbath, when you're allowed to take two days' worth – because the Sabbath is for resting.

The instruction goes hand-in-hand with the promise: there is more than enough, so only take what you need.

And do the people of Israel listen? You won't be surprised to hear that they didn't. If you read the rest of chapter 16, you'll hear how the Israelites do exactly the opposite of what God commanded. They start to hoard up food because they do not trust that there will be enough.

There's something very relatable, very human about this behaviour. When I read the story this week, I couldn't help but think of the early days of the pandemic. Sorry if I'm reopening old wounds. Do you remember that supply chains were disrupted by the lockdown and so people started to hoard up supermarket supplies in the fear that there wouldn't be enough. Of all the things we hoarded, toilet paper was the top of the list. That was what we really got scared about. And despite the Government's repeated assurances that there would be enough to go around so long as people didn't hoard, what did we do? We hoarded. Roll after roll. 3 ply, 2 ply, even 1 ply ... it flew off the shelves.

In other words, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we think there won't be enough and begin acting like there's not enough ... then there won't be enough to go around.

All that to say, that we human beings haven't progressed in 3000 years as far as we might like to think we have. When we're faced with need and lack, we act in much the same way as we always have. That is, like the Israelites in the wilderness, we are driven by fear to act in our own self-interest.

But here's the thing. Of any generation, we're the generation that has the least reason to act in that way. We live at a time in history when there is more to go around than there ever has been.

Consider the food industry. Through modern industrial farming and agriculture, we produce a huge amount of food. More than we could possibly need. In fact, it is estimated that in New Zealand every year we throw out more than 100,000 tonnes of perfectly good food. Most of that never even makes it to our supermarket shelves.

We live in a time of absurd contradiction. On the one hand, vast amounts of food goes to waste. On the other hand, we're in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis where many, many people in New Zealand are struggling to afford the basics of life. It's an absolute scandal! There is more than enough. We know there is more than enough. In fact, we're forcing the earth so hard to produce more and more food that we're now facing other issues like the degradation of top-soil, the poisoning of waterways, and the acidification of our oceans, the warming of our atmosphere. There is more than enough. And yet, at the same time, there is not enough. There is lack, there is need, there is poverty, there is a cost-of-living crisis. Something is profoundly wrong.

Why? Why do we live in a time of such absurd contradiction? That's a complex question that I don't profess to understand. And with the national election round the corner, we could debate at great length no doubt which political party has the best plan to turn things around.

But partly, I think, this absurd contradiction is a spiritual problem. To be blunt, we are living today beyond our means. We have created a consumerist ideal out of God's promise that

there is more than enough, forcing our natural environment beyond its natural limits. And all the while we forget the consequent commandment to therefore only take what we need for each day.

To pray, give us this day our daily bread, I think means two things today. First, it is an acknowledgment that all things come to us as a gift from God, who provides for our every need. In other words, these things are not ours by right – even if we paid for them --, but by grace. The prayer is an affirmation that there is more than enough to go around, so long as we only take what we need.

And that leads me to my second point. To pray, give us this day our daily bread, is a reminder. A reminder to us to only ask from God what we need for each day. We are not to hoard. We are not to live beyond our means. We are only to take our daily bread.

In other words, in our age of environmental collapse, this is a prayer for humility and a call to simplicity. It is an invitation to live generously from a posture of faith, rather than selfishly from a posture of fear.

As we head into a time when changing climate and intensifying weather patterns could increasingly disrupt global food supplies, I would argue this posture of love and generosity has never been more important. Otherwise, we will find ourselves living in a toilet-paper-less hell. And no one wants that.

I want to finish with a feel-good story. There's a restaurant that has opened up in our area. It's called Everybody Eats and its seeking to address the absurd contradiction I've been talking about. So, on the one hand, it's trying to address food waste. And on the other hand, it's addressing food poverty. How do they do this? Well, they collect food from various providers that is destined for landfill. The food is still perfectly good, but for a number of reasons can't be sold. A professional chef uses this recovered food and designs a quality three-course menu. It is open to all, and you pay whatever you like. Some can afford to pay \$20, \$30, \$50. Others can only afford to pay \$5, \$2, 50c. Some can't pay anything at all. And it works! The new restaurant is the third to open around the country. Alva and I have eaten there a couple of times and can attest to the fact that it is tasty food. It seems to me that Everybody Eats is one, small, practical example of what it means to live out the prayer for God to give us our daily bread. It is in many ways an embodiment of a new way of living together in which there is more than enough for all. Thanks be to God. Amen.