

Give us each day our daily bread

July 29, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

The only thing the Gospels record the disciples asking Jesus to teach them was ***how to pray*** (Lk. 11:1-4). They asked him for a model prayer and he gave them one, a little prayer, simple, childlike. It is pretty much an accepted fact that the most widely used prayer in all of Christendom is the one he gave them. We call it the ***Lord's Prayer***. Among the petitions recorded in it, as we heard in the Gospel a few moments ago is: ***give us each day our daily bread*** (v.3). It's not out of place for us to wonder what sense does it make for a company of well-fed, intelligent, modern Christians to kneel in Church and say together, ***give us each day our daily bread***.

We all know the difference between ***ritual*** and ***real***. When I meet someone on the street and say, ***Hello*** or ***Hi, how are you?*** these are generally ritual words, not much more than a friendly noise, which we exchange, sometimes not even waiting for an answer. But, if you were desperately ill and I came to the hospital and asked the nurse, ***how are things going***, these would be ***real*** words and I would be

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very anxious for the reply. When we say *give us each day our daily bread*, are these *real* words or ritual words?

After all, we're not living in the same conditions as the people to whom Jesus first taught these words. We're not Palestinian peasants tilling our own strip of land, waiting anxiously each year for the harvest on which our lives would literally depend. Bread for us is always in good supply just around the corner. We assume, without even thinking too much about it, that the materials for the complicated meals we eat will be there as long as we have the money to buy them. So, for modern people, it would seem, a basic prayer would more honestly be for dollars than for bread, but dollar bills are not very digestible.

In 1938, Josephine Young Case wrote an epic poem entitled *At Midnight on the 31st of March*. I remember it so well, because eight years after she wrote it, I had to study it in school and I still treasure that book.

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At midnight on the 31st of March, in the village of Saugersville, young John Herbert is left in the darkness when the electric power goes off. The next morning, George, who drives the milk truck, turns a bewildered face to the little group in the village store and says, *the road ain't there no more*. Searching parties, sent out north, south, east and west return, days later, exhausted and afraid. They can find none of the nearby towns familiar to them, no roads, no phone or power lines, no railroads, *no signs* of other people, no signs that any of these things had ever existed, only endless forests and wild animals. Overnight, their money, among other things, had become worthless.

If such a town as the one in which each of us lives was suddenly and completely isolated, as Saugersville, cut off from all its former sources of supply, within a few days *we* would be clamoring for bread, not money. There would be a need, a desperate, all-consuming, even humiliating,

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need. Gone would be the pious commentaries that Jesus meant us to pray for *spiritual* bread.

It's not necessary for us to go through the experience I described of what happened in Saugersville to realize how precarious is the affluence we take for granted. Surely we have the imagination to know that at this very moment millions, perhaps one third or more of the human beings on earth, are down there where bread, or rice, is the gnawing, dominating clamor of the soul. It *does* affect the soul, not just the body. The desire for bread can be overwhelming to the exclusion of everything else.

Give us each day our daily bread. Who is this *us*? Those of us here this morning? Our families? Our Nation? In the mind of Jesus *us* has one vast, inclusive meaning. *Us* is the whole human family. If we pray after a day in which our own bodily needs have been cared for and more, our prayer should remind us of our plenty. Our prayer should be for that family not too far away, where there are too

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many mouths to feed for the food available; for an emaciated boy sleeping in the filth of a Camden street; for a woman there who has nothing for her children for tomorrow. Our prayer is for *all* whom Jesus teaches us to remember.

Each week members of this Parish are encouraged to support, with their giving, the St. Paul's Food Basket Program in Camden, providing funds and food to feed the hungry, who might otherwise have no food. There are other members of the Parish who, weekly, transport hundreds of loaves of bread and bread products to St. Paul's. Others transport cases of items from the Food Bank. Still others fill over a hundred bags of food in the basement of St. Paul's for distribution on Fridays.

Many of us have been taught to think of religion as only the spiritual segment of our life as individuals. So for some, perhaps it's a shock to find a loaf of bread, the symbol of our basic physical need, right in the middle of a

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prayer to God. But, for Jesus, and for those he taught, there was no sharp distinction between the spiritual presence he sought as he hallowed the name of his heavenly Father and the material needs which were right before his eyes. Jesus brings us a God in charge of all that is, a God whose ways are ultimately beyond our understanding, but a God who has revealed enough to give us cause to trust him, to love him and to seek to do his will as best we can. In *His* name we should be ready to pray a real prayer with all who believe in the simple words that are literally *burning* with meaning for today's world:

Father in Heaven,

Give us each day our daily bread.

AMEN.