

Talk 5 Give us this day our daily bread

O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, You are everywhere present and fill all things. Treasury of blessings and Giver of life: come and abide in us, and cleanse us from every impurity, and save our souls, O Gracious Lord!

“Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt 6:11).

The word "daily" in this context really means “substantive”, that which is essential for survival, which is why we need it as daily food. If the first petitions related directly to God, if they expressed our desire that his name would be glorified, that his kingdom would come, that his will would be accomplished not only in heaven, but on earth as well; then with this petition we are, as it were, switching over to our own needs - we begin to pray for ourselves. The bread signifies not only bread as such, and not even food in general, but absolutely everything that is necessary for life, everything which makes it possible to live out our existence healthily each day.

In order to get to the very heart of this petition, it is important to recall everything related to the symbol of food in the Bible, for only there does this petition cease to have a limited relation to the strictly physical side of our life, and is disclosed in its fullness.

We find the meaning of food in the very first chapter of the Bible, in the account of the creation of humankind. Having created the world, God gives it as food for humankind, and this means first of all that our life depends on food, that is, on the world. We humans live by food, transforming food, into life and energy in order to live our own daily existence. This dependency of humankind on the external, on matter, on the world is so self-evident, that Feuerbach, one of the founders of materialist philosophy, once consigned humankind into the famous formula: “Man is what he eats”. But the teaching and revelation of the Bible does not rest on this dependency. We receive food, that is, life itself, from God. It is God’s gift to humankind and we live not in order to eat, and thereby maintain our physiological survival, but we should eat in order to develop within ourselves the image and likeness of God.

Thus, food itself became the gift of life as the knowledge of the freedom and the beauty of the spirit. Food is transformed into life, but food is revealed from the outset as the victory over this dependency on food *alone*, for in creating humankind God commands us to have dominion over the earth. Therefore, in receiving food from God as the gift of God, we are filled with divine life itself. This is why also the biblical account of the fall of humankind is linked with food.

This is the famous story of the forbidden fruit, which Adam ate secretly, apart from God, in order to become like God. The meaning of this account is simple: Adam and Eve believed that from food alone, that by pure reliance on its consumption, they could receive that which is actually possible to receive only from God. By way of food they sought liberation from God, which instead only led them to slavery and dependence on food; humankind became a slave of the world. But this also means a slave of death, for the food which gives us our physical life cannot give us that freedom from the world and death - this can only come from God. Food, the symbol and source of life, became the symbol of death. For if a person does not eat and drink they die. But, if we eat and drink, we still die, for food itself is a communion with that which has died, and therefore with death. And so, finally, salvation, and resurrection itself are linked also in the Gospel with food.

When Christ was tempted in the wilderness by the devil and felt hunger, the devil suggested that he turn the stones into bread, but Christ refused saying: "Man does not live by bread alone" (Matt 4:4). Jesus overcame and judged that very dependency of humankind on bread alone, on the physical side of life, which became the burden, in the biblical symbolism, of the first woman and man. Jesus freed himself from this dependency, and food became once more the gift of God, communion with the divine life, with freedom and eternity, and not slavery to the mortal world.

This is the profound meaning of that new divine food, which constitutes from the earliest days of Christianity the main joy, the chief mystery of the Church that which we Christians call the Eucharist, which means “Thanksgiving”. The Eucharist, faith in participation in the new food, in the new and heavenly bread, fulfils the Christian revelation about food. And only in the light of this revelation, of the joy of this thanksgiving, can one adequately understand the full depth of this fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread”. Give us, today, the food which is essential for us on this pilgrimage of life.

Naturally, in the first instance these are things which are basic to life: bread, food, water, air, all that which becomes our life. But this is not all. The phrase is; “(You) Give us”: this means that the ultimate source of all this for us is God himself, his love, his concern for us; in whatever form, or from whomever we may receive the gift, all is from him. But this means that the first meaning and goal of these gifts is God himself.

We receive bread, we receive life, but in order that the purpose of this life may be revealed. And the purpose of this life lies in God, in knowledge of him, in love of him, in communion with him, in the joy of his eternity, and in that life which the Gospel calls “life in abundance” (John 10:10).

My, how remote is this understanding, from the philosophy of that guide Feuerbach. Of course, as he said, man is what he eats. But what we eat is the gift of God's love, what we participate in is light, and glory, and joy, and sheer exuberance of living, we live by everything which God gives us.

Let us pray:

“Give us this day...” God, our Father, in your love, give us all this today; give us not simply to exist, but to truly love that full, meaningful, and profoundly divine eternal life, for which you created us, which you gave us, and which you always give us, and in which in turn we come to know, love and give thanks to you.

Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem

O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power, and idle talk.

But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Thy servant.

Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions, and not to judge my brother or sister, for blessed art Thou, unto ages of ages.
Amen