



Scriptures and Doctrine :: THE CRY FOR BREAD

THE CRY FOR BREAD - posted by pastorfrin, on: 2008/6/18 8:55

THE CRY FOR BREAD

Alexander Maclaren

‘Give us this day our daily bread.’—MATT. vi. 11.

What a contrast there is between the two consecutive petitions, Thy will be done, and Give us this day! The one is so comprehensive, the other so narrow; the one loses self in the wide prospect of an obedient world, the other is engrossed with personal wants; the one rises to such a lofty, ideal height, the other is dragged down to the lowest animal wants.

And yet this apparent bathos is apparent only, and the fact that so narrow and earthly a petition has its place in the pattern of all prayer is full of instruction. No less instructive is the place which it has. A single word about that place may constitute a fitting introduction to our remarks now. We have already seen how the former petitions constitute together a great whole. That first part of the prayer expresses the desires which should ever be foremost in a good man’s soul—those which have to do with God, and point to the advancement of His glory. It begins, as I said, with the inward, and advances to the outward, as must ever be the law of progress in the sanctifying of human souls and life. It begins with heaven and brings heaven down to earth, that earth may become like heaven, and both ‘according well may make one music.’ Then, in the second part of the prayer we come to individual wants. These have their legitimate place in our approaches to God. Prayer is not merely communion with God, not merely reverent contemplation of His fatherly and holy name, though that should always be first and chiefest in it. It is not merely the expression of absorbed contemplation, but of a nature that desires and is dependent. Nor is it only the utterance of world-wide desires, and the expression of a being that has conquered self. The perfection of man is not to have no desires, or to be petrified or absorbed into a state without a will and without a wish, still less to be elevated into a condition of absolute possession of all he seeks, without a want. And the perfection of prayer is not that it should be the utterance of that impossible emotion, ‘disinterested love’ to God, but that it should be the recognition of our dependence on God, the expression of our many wants, and the frank telling Him, with wills submitted, or rather conformed, to His, what we need. To pray is to adore; to pray is also to ask. We have to say Our Father, and we have also to say, Give us, being sure that if we, being evil, know how to give good gifts to our children, much more does He know how to give good things to them that ask Him.

So much for the general considerations applicable to the whole of this second part.

As to the connection of its several petitions with each other, it may be noticed that it is the exact opposite of the former part. That began with the highest and came downwards; this begins with the lowest and goes upwards. That began with the inward and worked outwards; this begins with the outward and passes inwards. That set forth the heavenly order in its gradual self-revelation, working the transformation of earth; this sets forth the earthly order in its gradual appropriation of Heaven’s gifts. The former declares, that foremost in importance and in God’s order are the spiritual blessings which come from knowledge of His name; the latter, beginning with the prayer for bread, and thence advancing to deeper necessities, reminds us, that in the order of time the least important is still the condition of all the rest. The loftiest pinnacles looking out to the morning sky must have their foundations rooted in common earth. ‘That was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural, and afterwards that which is spiritual.’ This order, then, is in symmetrical opposition to that of the previous part. There is a rhythmical correspondence in inverted movement, like the expansion and contraction of the heart, or the rise and fall of a fountain.

It is worth noticing how these two opposed halves make one whole; and as the former begins with contemplation of the fatherly greatness in the heavens, so the latter part, starting with the cry for bread, climbs slowly up through all the ills of life, and passing from want to trespass, human unkindness and hatred, and again to personal weakness and a tempting world, and the evil of sin and the evil of sorrow, reaches once more after cries and tears the point from which all began, and rises to heaven and God. The doxology comes circling round to the invocation, and the prayer, which has winged its weary way through all weltering floods of human sorrow and want, comes back like Noah’s dove, with peace born of its flight, to its home in God, and ends where it began. They whose prayer and whose lives start with ‘Our Father which art in Heaven,’ will end with the confidence and the praise, ‘Thine is the kingdom and the honour.’

Now looking at this petition in itself, I note—

I. The prayer for Bread.

This contains first an important lesson as to what may be legitimately the subject of our prayers.

The Lord by this juxtaposition condemns the overstrained and fantastic spiritualism which tramples down earthly wants and condemns desires rooted in our physical nature as sin. It is a wonderful testimony from Jesus of the worth of common gifts, that the desire for them should here stand beside that great one for the doing of God's will. There is nothing here of the false asceticism which undervalues the life which now is, nothing of the morbid tone of feeling which despises and condemns as sinful the due appreciation of and desire for the blessings of this life. To give predominance to material wants and earthly good is heathen and unchristian, therefore the petition for these follows the others. But to despise them and pretend to be indifferent to them is heathen and unchristian too; therefore the prayer for them finds its place among the others. So the right understanding of this prayer is a barrier against the opposite evils of a false sensuousness which forgets the spirit that is in the flesh, and of a false spirituality which forgets the flesh that is around the spirit. He who made us desire truth in the inward parts, made us also to desire our daily bread, and we observe His order when we do both, and seek the Kingdom of God, not exclusively, but first.

And not only is this petition the vindication of a healthy naturalism, but it also shows us that we may rightly make prayers of our desires for earthly things.

We sometimes hear it said that we have only a right to ask God for such gifts as holiness and conformity to His will. This has a truth, a great truth, in it. But it may be overstrained. We are to subdue our wishes, we are to be more anxious for our soul's health than for our bodily wants. We are to present our desires concerning all things in this life, with an implied 'if it be Thy will,' but while all that is true, we are also to ask Him for these lower blessings. Our prayers should include all which we desire, all which we need. Our desires should be such as we can turn into prayers. If we dare not ask God for a thing, do not let us seek for it. But whatever we do want, let us go to Him for it, and be sure that He does not wish to lip homage and fine-sounding petitions for things for which we do not really care, but that He does desire that we should be frank with Him, making a prayer of every wish, and seeing that we have neither wishes which we dare not make prayers, nor prayers which are not really wishes. Let our supplications cover all the ground of our daily wants, and be true to our own souls. If any man lack anything, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men life and breath and all things.

Then still further—the prayer is the recognition of God as the Giver of daily bread.

'Thou openest Thine hand,' says the old psalm, 'and satisfiest the desire of every living thing.' There is no part of the divine dealings of which the Bible speaks more frequently and more lovingly than His supply of all creatures' wants. It is a grand thought, 'Who feedeth the young ravens when they cry, who maketh the grass to grow on the mountains. The eyes of all wait upon Thee.' There is a magnificent verse in the 104th Psalm, which regards even the roar of the lion prowling for its prey in midnight forests as a cry to God—'The young lions seek their meat from God.' As Luther says somewhere in his rough prose—'Even to feed the sparrows God spends more than the revenues of the French king would buy.' And that universal bounty applies truly to those whose lot is 'In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread.' For us it is true. God feeds us. 'Thou givest meat to them that fear Thee, Thou wilt ever be mindful of Thy covenant.' In giving us our daily bread, His hand is hid under second causes, but these should not mask the truth from us.

God is the life of nature. His will is the power whose orderly working we call nature's laws. Force is the sign manual of God. There would be no harvest, no growth, unless to each seed God gave a body as it hath pleased Him. The existence of bread is the effect of His work. 'He hath not left Himself without witness in that He giveth rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.' as Paul said to the rough farmer folk of Lycaonia.

The distribution of the bread is of God.

By second causes, our work and other means.

Be it so. Here is a steam engine, in one room away at one end of your mill; here is a spindle whirring five hundred yards off. What then? Who thinks that that bit of belting moves the drum round which it turns, or that the cog-wheel that carries the motion originates it? The motion here has force at the other end, the effect here has its cause in God.

The nourishment by bread is of God.

‘Man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.’

The reason why any natural substance has properties is by reason of present will of God; they reside not in itself, but in Him.

All this we say that we believe when we pray this prayer.

How much it conflicts with our modern habit of putting God as far away from daily life as we can!

The prayer is the consecration of our work for bread.

The indirect way by which it is answered is a great blessing, and it pledges us to labour.

Orare est laborare. Not, as it is sometimes quoted, as if toil was to do instead of prayer, but that active life may be consecrated to God, and all our efforts which terminate in gaining bread for ourselves and for those we love may become prayer, and be offered to God.

How can we pray for God to give us our daily bread, and then go to seek it by means which we dare not avow or defend in our prayers? Bless my cheating, bless my sharp practice, bless my half-heartedness. It is no part of my business to apply principles to details of conduct, but it is my business to say—take this prayer for a test, and if you dare not pray it over what you do in earning your living, ask yourself whether you are not rather earning your death.

Then the prayer is a pledge of thankful recognition of God in our blessings.

Ah! dear friends, are we not all guilty in this? How utterly heathenish is our oblivion of God in our daily life! How far we have come from that temper which recognises Him in all joys, and begins every new day with Him! Daily mercies demand daily songs of praise. His love wakens us morning by morning. It follows us all the day long with its fatherly benefits. It reveals itself anew every time He spreads our table, every time He gives us teaching or joy. And our thanksgiving and consciousness of His presence should be as constant as are His gifts. ‘My voice shalt thou hear in the morning.’ ‘They walk all the day long in the light of Thy countenance.’ ‘I will both lay me down in peace and sleep.’ ‘They ate their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.’

Continued:

Re: THE CRY FOR BREAD - posted by enid, on: 2008/6/18 9:46

Bathos - an unintentional lapse in mood from the sublime to the absurd or trivial.

Just thought I'd mention that, because I didn't know what the word bathos meant, until I looked it up in the dictionary.

Quote: 'How utterly heathenish is our oblivion of God in our daily life!'

This can be so true. We get on with our day and leave God far behind until the next day.

God should be our daily bread, because, man cannot live by bread alone.

But I believe we understand what the scripture means.

God bless.

Re: THE CRY FOR BREAD - posted by pastorfrin, on: 2008/6/19 22:18

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Alexander Maclaren

‘Give us this day our daily bread.’—MATT. vi. 11.

II. The union with our brethren in our prayer.

‘Give us.’ The struggle for existence is represented by many as the very law of human life. The fight for bread is the great antagonist of brotherly regard for our fellows. Trade is said to be warfare; and then others starting from that conception that one man’s gains are some other man’s losses, proclaim with undoubted truth on these premises ‘property is robbery.’ But surely this clause of our prayer teaches us a more excellent way. We are not to be like stiff-necked men who fight with one another for the drop of brackish water caught in the corner of a sail, but we are to be as children bowing down together before a great Father, all sitting at His table where nothing wants, and where even the pet dogs below it eat of the crumbs.

The main thing is to note how our Lord teaches us here to identify ourselves with others, to make common cause with them in our petition for bread. He who rightly enters into the meaning of this prayer, and feels the unity which it supposes, can scarcely regard his possessions as given to himself alone, or to be held without regard to other people. We are all one in need; high and low, rich and poor, we all hang on God for the same supplies. We are all one in reception of His gifts. Is it becoming in one who is a member of such a whole, to clasp his portion in both his hands and carry it off to a corner where he gnaws it by himself? That is how wolves feast, with one foot on their bone and a watchful eye all round for thieves, not how men, brethren, should feast.

I am not here to deal with economical questions, or to apply principles to details, but surely one may say that this petition contemplates as possible a better state of things than ‘each for himself,’ whether God is for us all or no, and that it does teach that at all events a man is part of a whole which has a claim on his possessions. ‘Neither said any man that aught which he possessed was his own.’

The Christian doctrine of property does not seem to be communism. You have your property. It is your own. You have the power, and as far as law is concerned, the right, to do with it none but selfish acts. You have it, but you are not an owner—only a steward. You have it, but you hold it not for your own sake, but as a trustee. You have it as a member of a family, a great community. You have it that you may dispense to others, you have it that you may help to multiply the bonds of affection to benefactors and of love to the great Giver.

And this liberality is founded, according to this petition, in our common relation to God. We do not want charity—we want justice. The needy cannot enforce their claims, but their cry enters into the ears of the Lord, and what is withheld from them is ‘kept back by fraud.’ The Bible always puts benevolence and liberality on the ground of their being a debt. ‘Withhold not good from him to whom it is due.’

So how, beside this prayer, does it look to see two men who have united in it, the one being Dives clothed and faring sumptuously, and the other Lazarus with scraps for his food and dogs for his doctors? There is many a contrast like that to-day. All I have to say is—that such contrasts are not meant as the product of Christianity and civilisation and commerce for eighteen hundred years, and that one chief way of ending them is that we shall learn to feel and live the true communism which traces all a man’s possessions to God, and feels that he has received them as a member of a community for the blessing of all, even as Christ taught when He bid us say, ‘Give us our daily bread.’

III. The prayer for bread for to-day.

This carries with it precious truths as to the manner of the divine gifts and the limit of our cares and anxieties.

God gives not all at once, but continuously, and in portions sufficient for the day.

As with the manna fresh gathered every morning, so all our gifts from Him are given according to the present exigencies

Note the beauty and blessedness of this method of supplying our wants. It gives to each moment its own special character, it gives to each the glory of having in it a fresh gift of God. It binds all together in one long line of brightness made up of an infinite number of points, each a separate act of divine love, each a glittering sign of His presence. It brings God very near to all life. It draws us closer to Him, by giving us at each moment opportunity and need for feeling our dependence upon Him, by bringing us once again to His throne that our wants may be supplied. And as each moment, so each day, comes with its new duties and its new wants. Yesterday's food nourishes us not to-day. To-day's strength must come from this day's God and His new supplies. And thus the monotony of life is somewhat broken, and there come to us all the fresh vigour and the new hope of each returning day, and the merciful wall of the night's slumber is built up between us and yesterday with its tasks and its weariness. And fresh elastic hopes, along with renewed dependence on God, should waken us morning by morning, as we look into the unknown hours and say, 'Give us this day our daily bread.'

Then, again, let us learn not to try to abrogate this wise ordinance by onward-looking anxieties. We have to exercise forethought, and not to possess it is to be a poor creature, below the ant and the bee. No man is in a favourable position for intellectual or moral growth who has not some certainty in his life, and a reasonable prospect of such perpetuity as is compatible with this changeful state. But that is a very different thing from the careful, anxious forebodings in which we are all so prone to indulge. These are profitless and harmful, robbing us of strength and contributing nothing to our wisdom or to our security. They are contrary to this law of the divine dealings that we shall get our rations as we need them, no sooner; that the path will be opened when we come to it, not till then. God knows the line of march, and will issue our route each morning. God looks after the commissariat and saves us the trouble of carrying it.

Let us try not to be 'over-inquisitive to cast the fashion of uncertain evils,' nor magnify trouble in the fog of our own thoughts, but limit our cares to to-day, and let to-morrow alone, for our God will be in it as He has been in the past. He will never take us where He will not go with us. Each day will have its own brightness, as each place its own rainbow. If we are led into dry lands, there will be a fountain opened in the desert, and He will feed us by His ravens ere we shall want. Bread shall be given and water made sure. To-morrow shall be as this day. Then let the veil still hang, nor try to lift it with the hand of forecasting thought, nor be over-careful to make the future sure by earthly means, but let present blessings be parents of bright hopes. Remember Him who is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever. In Him the past is unwept for and the future sure. Accept the merciful limitations on His gifts, and let them be the limitations which you set to your own desires while you pray, 'Give us this day our daily bread.'

IV. The prayer for bread suited to our needs.

'Daily bread' clearly cannot be the right rendering, for after 'this day' that would be weak repetition.

The word is difficult, for it only occurs here and there in Luke.

It may be rendered 'for the coming (day),' but that can scarcely be supposed to be our Lord's meaning, when His precept to take no thought for the morrow is remembered. A more satisfactory rendering is, 'sufficient for our subsistence,' the bread which we need to sustain us.

Such a petition points to desires limited by our necessities. What we should wish, and what we have a right to ask from God, is what we need—no more and no less.

This does not reduce us all to one level, but leaves Him to settle what we do want. How different this prayer in the mouth of a king and of a pauper! But it does rebuke immoderate and unbridled desires. God does not limit us to mere naked necessities—He giveth liberally, and means life to be beautiful and adorned. That which is over and above bread is to a large extent that which makes life graceful and refined, and I have no wish to preach a crusade against it; but I have just as little hesitation in declaring what it is not left to pulpit moralists to say, that the falsely luxurious style of living among us looks very strange by the side of this petition. So much luxury which does not mean refinement; so much ostentatious expenditure which does not represent increased culture or pleasure or anything but a resolve to be on a level with somebody else; so much which is so ludicrously unlike the poor little shrimp of a man or woman that sits in the centre of it all!

'Plain living and high thinking are no more.'

'My riches consist not in the abundance of my possessions, but in the fewness of my wants.'

'The less a man needs, the nearer is he to the gods.'

So, what a lesson for us all in this age, where everyone of us is tempted to adopt a scale of what is necessary very far beyond the truth.

Young and old—dare, if need be, to be poor. 'Having food and raiment, let us therewith be content.'

We cannot all become rich, but let us learn to bring down our desires to, and bound them by, our true wants.

Christ has taught us here to put this petition after these loftier ones, and He has taught us to pass quickly by it to the more noble and higher needs of the soul. Do we treat it thus, making it a secondary element in our wishes? If so, then our days will be blessed, each filled with fresh gifts from God, and each leading us to Him who is the true Bread that came down from Heaven.

Alexander Maclaren