

Give us Today Our Daily Bread

An Address by the Rev Dr Noel C Schultz
Highfield Road Uniting Church, 16th July 2006.

There could hardly be a greater contrast! After grappling with the mind-blowing concepts of hallowing God's name, letting his kingdom come and doing God's will, our Lord taught us to pray for something as tangible, basic and tasty as bread. Yet, though this petition lacks much of the mystery and grandeur of the earlier ones, we are saying some important things about God and our life under God when we pray these words. Let me draw your attention to three things that I think are important about this prayer.

1

The ordinary, down-to-earth needs of life are appropriate matters for prayer.

The body and physical life are at the centre of our life. The people of Israel pictured God in ancient times shaping the human body with infinite care and providing food in abundance to sustain that life. The creation stories speak naturally of the physical union of man and woman, as being part of the created order which was pronounced 'very good'. In contrast with Greek philosophers who downgraded the body, describing it as prison-house for the all-important soul, the Christian Church for much of its history has emphasised the importance of body and soul, and has recognised the need of the body, along with the needs of the inner spirit. Part of the Christian tradition has been a strong belief in the resurrection of the person, not the continuation of disembodied spirits after death.

When praying for daily bread we will have in mind special needs that we have at particular times in life. For farmers in much of Australia right now daily bread is tied up with the need for drought-breaking rain. We, in the city, need to adjust to water saving behaviours, but in much of this country, reservoirs are almost empty, farm dams are dry, crops are still in need of continuing rain.

Daily bread includes all that we need to maintain and extend human life and well-being. So this prayer is spoken appropriately when persistent pain robs us of sleep, or by families torn apart by strife; it is prayed with special meaning in time of elections, in times of peace and in time of war.

Maslow, some decades ago, correctly pointed out that we have a hierarchy of needs from the most basic for food and shelter to others like security, affection and acceptance. He spoke of the importance of self-esteem and a

sense of achieving something with one's life – all of these components of a satisfying life may be rightly included under daily bread.

2

This petition needs to be seen as a prayer of thanksgiving. Little Tommy had yet to discover that side of the prayer. He prayed every night when he went to bed. When asked if he prayed in the morning when he woke up, he replied, 'No, I'm not scared in the daylight'.

Jesus reminded us that God gives us our daily bread whether we pray for it or not; the sun will rise tomorrow whether we ask for it or not; there will be food on our table and a warm house to live in and doctors to consult when we are sick, whether we pray for these things or not. The fact that our heavenly Father knows we have need of these things does not make our praying 'Give us this day our daily bread' superfluous. For in praying we are acknowledging God's goodness to us, we are recognising God as the giver of every good and perfect gift, we are receiving our daily bread with thanksgiving.

With thankful hearts we may be recalling how we came through stressful days with the support of family and friends; we may be aware of how modern medicine and skilful surgeons gave us healing; or of friendships re-established, holidays enjoyed, dangers averted. In brief, this is not so much a 'give me' prayer – it is a 'thank you' prayer.

3

A third point that needs to be made when praying this petition has to do with the personal pronouns 'give us our daily bread'.

You may remember that when speaking about 'Our Father' I said this is a corporate prayer; we pray for and with one another. So when praying give us today our daily bread, we have the responsibility under God to ensure that our bread is rightly and legitimately ours, that we have not acquired it deceitfully or dishonestly or at the expense of others. In theory this sounds fine and clear-cut, but in actual practice it is often difficult and confusing. Let me explain.

Ours is an intensely competitive world, 'dog-eat-dog', so to speak. It is expected that we have career and work goals, relationship goals, and other

personal and social goals; in order that we might achieve these goals there are extensive gray areas that need to be negotiated. We have to weigh up personal needs and rights, as well as the needs and rights of others; legitimate self-interest over against greed and selfishness; we have to take responsibility for one self whilst not losing sight of our shared or corporate responsibility. After the decade of rampant greed in the 80s, and the persistent inducement for several decades of giving individualism free rein, there is a very real need to ensure that our daily bread, in whatever form it takes, is genuinely ours, not someone else's that we have gained through deception.

But the use of 'us' and 'our' ought to stimulate us to think of the needs that others also have for their daily bread. When Jesus provided bread for the hungry thousands in the wilderness through the sharing of resources, he was illustrating corporate responsibility.

One of the more pleasing aspects of modern life is the sharing of resources on a global scale with those who are experiencing violence in nature, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, cyclones, famines and bushfires. It is exciting to see the willingness of kind people, governments and philanthropists demonstrating humanitarian concern for the hungry, the homeless, and those who through medical intervention, or the provision of clean water and education can be saved from disease and poverty. With improved communication and speedy transport we are able to share our daily bread almost immediately with those in desperate need. This is a very positive thing about today's world. Compassionate people are enabled to take immediate and appropriate action through any one of a dozen reputable organisations devoted to assisting others enjoy their daily bread. I have no doubt that collectively as a faith community and individually you too give of your bounty to enable others to have food in their stomachs and hope in their hearts for tomorrow. I am sure you will continue to give this the priority it deserves.

So in praying 'Give us this day our daily bread' you may reflect on these three points:

1. Any matter of concern for our life and well-being is an appropriate matter to take to God in prayer
2. It is with a thankful spirit that we acknowledge that our needs in life are being constantly met
3. We are committed to help others receive their daily bread.

