



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 14 October 2007
Title: **"Bread Talk"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Deuteronomy 8: 1-3,6-10
Second Reading James 1: 17-18,21-27
Gospel Matthew 6: 25-33

Harvest Festival Sermon. "Bread Talk"

(With Considerable Thanks to Jeff Smith's *The Frugal Gourmet Keeps the Feast*)

Today, as we observe our own rather eccentrically positioned "Thanksgiving", I would like to talk about bread. The staff know my own personal weaknesses. Every Wednesday we have lunch together at Glorietta 4 and as we enter have to pass the local branch of a new Singaporean bakery chain called "Bread Talk". The smells emanating from that place are like a siren call to me and I find myself irresistibly compelled to change course and attempt to enter before the girls pull me onwards. All the same, we often retrace our steps after lunch and bring home goodies for merienda anyway. Chocolates and sweets have never been a real temptation to me, but watch out with bread and pasta!

Bread has great symbolic value in Scripture. Consider what it meant in the ancient world. Every day, the mother of the house would rise at 5 or so in the morning and began baking the bread. It was the basis of all meals, three times a day. When a meal was ready, the whole family gathered- no excuse that dinner would be missed

because of basketball practice or going to the mall with friends. You ate bread with your family or you ate nothing at all.

Bread, for us, has become something of an add-on. Yes, we may start our day with toast or pandesal, but it most often is a side dish. Bread was so important in the ancient world that it was used as a word for "life". The biblical Hebrew word for bread, *lechem*, most often means food in general and thus life itself. No bread- no life. Think of the word manna, too. Bread from Heaven- God's gift to his children. No matter how bad things get for us, God is there ahead of us and willing and able to provide what we probably do not deserve.

Bread, and the grain that was most often made into bread, are also used in Scripture to teach lessons about concern for others. The corners of the fields were to be left unharvested for the poor to reap. The farmer, who had, was responsible for those who had not. Bread teaches us that we must feed others or some of us will die.

Think of other bible phrases that use bread- the Bread of Angels, the Bread of Heaven on the positive side, but also Bread of Affliction, Bread of Toil, the Bread of Tears. In other words, bread was for the ancients a perfect symbol for all of life. While it is true that we most often hear about Temple sacrifices using cattle, sheep or goats, the fact is that grain and bread were also offered in the Temple, including twelve loaves offered weekly to God and displayed on a special table within the sacred walls, reminds us of the sacred use of bread.

The centrality of bread caused problems when Christianity spread to Asia. Although there has been a bread culture in India and China for thousands of years, we here in the Farthest Far East see rice as the central food. Although I am not aware of any church liturgies written using rice for Holy Communion, we have in one of our hymnals a hymn

from the Christians of Malaysia that sings *The rice of life from heaven came to bring true life from God above. And: The living rice, for all a sign, came down eternal life to give.*

In either case, using bread or rice as an image of life, there is a common feature that needs to be remembered on a day like today when we are "giving thanks." Any gratitude we show, any gifts we share with other, any sense of thankfulness we may have is false if someone we think that it is from our largesse, our bounty or our goodness that it comes. We pride ourselves on being independent, on having our lives under control and proceeding according to plan. That illusion can last only until our next meal- only until our bodies tell us that they need nourishment. To deny our need of bread- or rice- is to invite weakness, sickness and death. The only way life can continue is for us to take from God's creation around us- take it into ourselves- and fuel these vehicles that are our bodies. No more profound image of our dependence on God's goodness and God's provision for us can be found.

How fitting therefore that when Christ chose to leave us a commemoration of his Death for us, and also a celebration of his life-giving Resurrection, He would use bread and wine to do so: simple things, vital things. The meal He shared with His friends most likely contained other dishes of meat and vegetables and even salads, but what has stayed with us in our weekly celebration are the basics- the bread "to strengthen our hearts" and the wine "to gladden" them- the symbols of the natural world transformed by the skill of man and used as a vehicle for God's presence with and for His people.

Bread- the Staff of Life: not only a symbol, but the very essence of our dependence on God for life and nourishment. As we give thanks to God today, let us remember how dependent we are on this basic gift, and on each other, for life and for salvation.