

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Oct 9th 2013

Give us each day . . .

The disciples ask Jesus what they should ask God for, and he gives them (and us) these five petitions, all related to the inauguration of God's reign on earth. For four of them that connection is pretty obvious ("make holy your name"; "establish your reign"; "forgive our failings"; and "put us not to the test when your rule upsets the way we have ordered our world"). But "give us each day our daily bread" . . . how does that fit?

This petition has challenged scholars since the early days of the Church. It is often interpreted to mean what it seems to say – that we should ask God for what we need to get by, day by day. And indeed we should ask, for doing so acknowledges both our ultimate dependence upon God and God's own goodness. But that is probably not what was meant by Jesus when he told His disciples to ask for this bread, nor what was understood by the early Church. Otherwise Matthew, in assembling the Sermon on the Mount, would have had Jesus contradicting himself. Recall: Jesus told his disciples not to worry about food or clothing. "Your Father in heaven knows you need all those things." So it would seem unlikely that, in the same sermon, Jesus would tell people to ask God for food.

But there is an even stronger, linguistic reason for rejecting this apparently obvious interpretation. The word the Latin Bible translates as "daily" was actually a made-up word, coined by the evangelists or their sources, and not otherwise in use outside the Bible. Its etymology suggests that it meant "super-essential", clearly something more than ordinary bread. Most likely it referred to what, in St. John's gospel, is termed the "bread of life" – Jesus' own self. In Catholic Christianity that would be a reference to the Eucharist and to what it foreshadows, the messianic banquet when God's reign/kingdom on earth is fully realized.

As ordinary bread (or its equivalent) is essential for ordinary life, so this "super-ordinary" bread is essential for the Christ life, the "super-ordinary" life conferred on us at Baptism. With ordinary nutrition food not only serves as fuel, but many of its components are incorporated into our own body tissues. We actually do become, in a sense, what we eat. So, in the Eucharist, Christ's own life is renewed in us, providing food for the journey, while at the same time Christ Himself is literally absorbed into our being. We become more and more Christ-like.

Surely that is an important thing to ask for, and just as surely it is necessary for God's reign among us. That's why Jesus tells us to ask for it. The Eucharist is so important that Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx wrote that the faithful "have a right to the Eucharist" – just as humans have a right to basic, ordinary nutrition

Robert P. Heaney