

Grain

Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.

PSALM 127:1 NIV

Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tyre?

Corrie Ten Boom



The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

JAMES 5:16 NIV

I am not righteous. Jesus is the righteous man

When Jesus taught His friends how to pray, He gave them a basics prayer. Bare bones and necessities.

First off – ‘Our Father in heaven, Thy Name is holy’ – is the necessity to contemplate and adore the loving, wise, divine mystery at the heart of things that breathes light into the everyday and makes life worth living. It’s not that God craves worship; God is happy and complete. It’s that unless our day centres right from the start on that divine core, we live with an off-centre, dislocated soul. Regardless entirely of what achievements, status and success we may demonstrably have, we don’t sit right with the universe unless each day fits in a socket of contemplation and adoration of the holy.

Second base – ‘Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ There is an important thing to notice about this. If Jesus says to pray this way, the implication must surely be that we expect a positive result. If you have read the Gospels, you will know that Jesus was not in the business of pipe-dreams. The ending of a prayer is ‘Amen’ – which means not ‘I wish’ but ‘Let it be’. If we do nothing more with this prayer, let’s get this much straight at least: it can be done. In fact, it will be done, because Jesus prayed it – the Jesus who said, ‘Lazarus





– come out’, and Lazarus came out who had been three days in the tomb; the same Jesus who said to the tempest, ‘Calm down’, and the tempest came to heel. I, who have had the utmost difficulty calming down even a raging two-year-old or a split congregation, have no idea how he did that; but I believe that he did. So I believe that when Jesus tells me to pray, ‘Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven’, this is not with a sigh and a shake of the head, as if to say, ‘Ah, yes – wouldn’t it be nice.’ No. This is going to take place. And if it takes place in nobody else’s version of earth, it’s going to take place in mine. As far as my jurisdiction extends (even if that is no further than the limits of my middle-aged body), I am going to see to it that this prayer comes true; not by might, not by power, for I have none – but most certainly by the Spirit of the Lord. Why else would He tell me to pray it?

And then the request that is the germination-point for this book: ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’

I trust this prayer – but what am I asking for?

Our daily bread is the stuff we need to nourish us. It’s to fill us up and give us health and energy, and strengthen us and make us grow. Our daily bread is to be tasty and delicious; and if we have it in our pilgrim’s bag, all we will need is a wayside spring of fresh water, and we shall be all right.

‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.

ZECCHARIAH 4:6 NIV

Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

MATTHEW 6:31–33 NIV

... if... thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.

MATTHEW 6:22 KJV





After such a day how sharp your appetite, how good the taste of food! Harriet's brown bread (moist, with thick, sweet, dark crusts) was never quite so delicious, and when the meal is finished you push back your chair feeling like a sort of lord.

'That was a good supper, Harriet,' you say expansively.

'Was it?' she asks modestly, but with evident pleasure.

'Cookery,' you remark, 'is the greatest art in the world –'

'Oh, you were hungry!'

David Grayson, *Adventures in Contentment*



So this is what we have asked for. And the rest of what follows here is looking with a quiet eye into what that means: what is it that nourishes us, that feeds us? What do we need to strengthen and heal us? What is the nature of the provision we have asked for, the daily bread we beg God to place into the hand we hold out for His gift?

Let's start with the grain.

Bread, whether earthly or metaphysical, is made up of all sorts of things. But the basis – the body – of the loaf is grain.

The grain of this loaf we are making, our daily bread, is simplicity. Simplicity is the body of what will nourish and strengthen us, feed and heal us, give us stamina for the journey. Simplicity is what will continue to taste good when we are sick of life's confectionery and soda and giant steaks.

Can you see and hold this loaf of bread in your imagination? Chunky, dense, brown bread with its sweet, nutty flavour; full of goodness. Bread, the simplest food; for every day.

When people discuss what is the kernel of the Gospel, of course they say 'love' – for Jesus identified love as the one hallmark of a disciple. Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher once surprised a radio interviewer by describing the essence of





Christianity as ‘choice’: and it was a shrewd insight, for the love and trust Jesus calls us to, the faith that gets us on our feet to follow Him, don’t just happen to us – they are choices, freely made. Perhaps for an atheist looking on, the key factor would be ‘faith’, the believer’s gift. But I have come to believe that the threshold of the Way of Life is simplicity. We make the choice; we receive the faith; we place our trust in God; we accept the disciplines of love. But the starter-motor is simplicity. If that’s dead, we aren’t going anywhere.

How Jesus put it, calling a small child to stand in the midst of them, was: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 18:3 NIV).

The entry point is simplicity. No person will make any headway with any spiritual path in any religion unless they go through the way of simplicity, because it is the only way. Unless we change and become like little children, it is just not possible to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Many people say that simplicity is a personal choice (it is, but not in the sense that they mean it – optional); some are called to it, others are not. Soothingly, reasonably, as to a wilful child (my bad attitudes drive them to it, but they’re still wrong!), they explain to me that as long as a person has simplicity on

The Lord said, Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

1 KINGS 19:11-13 NIV

Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.

LUKE 14:33 NIV





The more you have, the more you are occupied, the less you give. But the less you have the more free you are. Poverty for us is a freedom.

Mother Teresa



As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way... poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

2 CORINTHIANS 6:10 NIV

the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy

JOB 38:7 NIV

the inside, in the heart, that's what matters – then it's okay to embrace all the trappings of worldliness, because what God looks on is the heart. Unequivocally I refute this. They mean well, but their advice is a signpost that points in the wrong direction. We will make no headway unless we make simplicity *our daily bread* – the physical substance from which we feed in our everyday life.

The grain, the body, the basic material of our daily bread is simplicity. Different people attach different meanings to 'simplicity', though, so I must define my terms or we shall be at cross-purposes all the way through.

The basis for my understanding of Christian simplicity arrived in my life when I came across the stories of St Francis of Assisi when I was fifteen years old. Francis said he had fallen in love with Lady Poverty. He embraced a path of humility and littleness, always willing to choose the smallest and the least, walking barefoot through the world, working with his hands, begging for his bread, seeking the poor as his companions, serving the sick and suffering, and preaching the Gospel by all means – both in word and life. Set free from the insulating layer of possessions that so deadens the spirit, Francis lived very immediately in the natural environment of the living earth. A typical dwelling for him was an abandoned donkey-shed in the forest, or the ruins of a tumbledown church. So he spent





a lot of time outside, and became increasingly sensitive to the song of praise the earth is always singing. Every living thing is turned to God in an attitude of adoration. Over the centuries, Christianity has developed a disturbingly materialistic view of creation. Claiming the scripture that humanity is made in the image of God, our theologians have left the text to add a presumptuous article of faith that has no ground at all in the Bible – that human beings alone have souls. On this understanding, believers have felt it acceptable to treat the earth as a combined playground/store-cupboard, there to be plundered and enjoyed with no thought for the consequences. As disquieting rumours of climate change began to be heard, believers thought they were standing firm on the scriptures when they claimed the text in the book of Revelation promising a new heaven and a new earth (so it didn't matter if we ruined the one we already had, completely).

But such is not a biblical faith. The Bible speaks of the (physical, starry) heavens that tell the glory of God and proclaim His handiwork, in Psalm 19. The story of the great flood concludes with God showing Noah the rainbow, and describing it as: 'the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth'. So God has a relationship with every living thing; all are known to Him and important to him. The book of Job speaks of the intimate relationship of servanthood and dependency that joins all living things to God. 'Do you send

*Praise him, sun and moon,
praise him, all you shining
stars.*

*Praise him, you highest
heavens and you waters
above the skies. Let them
praise the name of the
Lord, for he commanded
and they were created.
He set them in place for
ever and ever; he gave a
decree that will never pass
away.*

*Praise the Lord from
the earth, you great sea
creatures and all ocean
depths, lightning and hail,
snow and clouds, stormy
winds that do his bidding,
you mountains and all
hills, fruit trees and all
cedars, wild animals and
all cattle, small creatures
and flying birds, kings of
the earth and all nations,
you princes and all rulers
on earth, young men and
maidens, old men and
children.*

*Let them praise the
name of the Lord!*

PSALM 148:3-13 NIV





[Christ] is before all things, and in him all things hold together... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

COLOSSIANS 1:15-20 NIV

Without changing our patterns of thought, we will not be able to solve the problems that we created with our current patterns of thought.

Albert Einstein



the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, ‘Here we are?’ asks God of Job (38:35), and: ‘Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food?’ Are we saying that the Bible is mistaken, or speaking metaphorically only, in reporting God describing the raven crying out to Him?

An authentically biblical faith acknowledges that everything that lives has a relationship with God, sings His praises, proclaims His power, and is entitled to a point of view. Therefore an authentically biblical faith approaches the earth and all earth’s creatures with profound respect; not as deities, tree-gods to be worshipped or nature spirits to guide us, but as fellow-servants of the living God, made and known and loved by Him, and living to praise and adore Him; as we ourselves are too.

The life of simplicity Francis espoused woke him up to the paean of praise earth is always singing, inspiring him to write the famous *Laudes Creaturarum*, or *Canticle of the Sun*, in which he takes his place in the great chorus of adoration that continually rises from the creation to its Creator.

So it was first Francis, the ‘little poor man of Assisi’, whose life whispered to me down the centuries, and called me into the way of Christian simplicity and reverence for God’s holy Creation.





With the passing of the years I continued to learn, sometimes from the Catholic tradition (the example of believers like Mother Theresa and Dorothy Day, and the witness of the monastic tradition over hundreds of years), and sometimes from Anabaptist witness (Amish, Mennonite, Hutterite and Brethren communities), and sometimes from the lives of individuals who had shaken off complacency and chosen a way of greater clarity, living out in beautiful simplicity their call to follow Christ. I read about the Quakers in their early roots, and modern-day conservative Quakers like Scott Savage; the vision of William Penn; and the Shakers with their wonderful aesthetic of domestic simplicity.

All of them helped to shape my life and understanding, until the call of God tugging at my soul emerged eventually into clearer focus.

This was what the grain of my life, the body of the daily bread I had so often prayed for, was to be.

Christian simplicity, the entry point of the kingdom of God and the basic material of our daily bread, affects our management of:

- Time
- Money

With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

MICAH 6:6-8 NIV





If we don't change direction soon, we'll end up where we're going.

Irwin Corey



Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

1 JOHN 2:15 NIV

Where there is no vision, the people perish...

PROVERBS 29:18 KJV

- Possessions
- Speech
- Action (output) and information (input)
- Relationships
- Resources
- Our homes
- Our transport
- The way we dress

As we practise simplicity in a daily walk of faith, its peace percolates through each of those areas. This is not just a hobby, a social trend or a feel-good undertaking. It is a response to clear scriptural imperatives running throughout the Bible as a whole, both Old Testament and New Testament. These imperatives are strongly present in the Gospels, in the teachings of Jesus, where they are central. So we are not talking about minor, peripheral, take-it-or-leave-it issues, but something foundational to being a Christian at all.

The grain of our loaf is this vision of biblical simplicity; the sense of call in all aspects of our life. The vision has to be present. Simplicity is not easy; it requires discipline. We have to pay attention to the detail of life, think ahead, consider consequences and be aware of our environmental and political





contexts, in making the choice of simplicity. When we begin the journey, what it asks of us can seem overwhelming, but as we persevere, a wonderful joy of freedom permeates our lives – the sense of burdens lifted, of more spaciousness than we had ever imagined, the light heart that is necessary to walk gracefully in Christ's strait and narrow way.

Christian simplicity means living quietly, in humble, ordinary houses, with as few possessions as we can manage – and those that we have being ordinary, simple things, not status symbols or expensive, luxury items. It means making choices that are socially and environmentally sustainable; sharing by choice the possibilities available to the poorer people in our society. It means choosing clothing that is modest and decent, not swanky or sexually provocative; refraining from stridency, coarseness and aggression in our speech. Christian simplicity involves working with our hands; conscious commitment to sharing; exercising frugality, thrift and good stewardship in our financial affairs – and this stewardship includes recollecting that every purchase we make is a political choice, an environmental choice, and a spiritual choice. 'Bless, bless; and do not curse, purse', I wrote on my wallet when my children were little: they still remember that, now they are grown and responsible for their own finances. In management of money, those who follow the way of Christian simplicity hold in mind the biblical prohibition of usury (lending money at interest): they borrow

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

MATTHEW 11:28-30 NIV

No man can serve two masters ... Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

MATTHEW 6:24 KJV

It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.

St Francis of Assisi





Buy things for their usefulness rather than for their status. Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you. Develop a habit of giving things away. Learn to enjoy things without owning them. Reject anything that breeds the oppression of others.

Richard Foster,
A Celebration of Discipline



A religion that takes no account of practical affairs and does not help to solve them is no religion.

Mohandas Gandhi



only when needs must (and when it is the thriftiest option), and then the absolute minimum and repay at the earliest opportunity. They are committed to sharing – their money, their homes, their possessions and their daily life – so that none are in want, everything goes further, and they are not burdened with soul-destroying occupations or steeped over-much in the world. Christian simplicity is mindful that our lives are called to be holy unto the Lord, keeping a wise watch on the gateways of our senses, for we are living temples of the Holy Spirit of God, expected by our Master to choose purity and turn away from inviting or contemplating anything that tends to corrupt us and make us cynical, lascivious or decadent.

Simplicity is the basic material of our daily bread; the first choice. It is the deciding factor – are you going to make this loaf or not? The other ingredients are all there to work with this one basic, central, essential ingredient – simplicity – that is to be at the heart of our daily living.

