

Lent IV Mothering Sunday Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive them that trespass against us.

Bread and forgiveness, these are the subject of the petitions of the second section of the Lord's Prayer. We ask God to give, and to forgive, everything we need.

So the subjects of our Gospel and Epistle for today are the same themes. The Gospel is clearly about bread, the lack of it and the abundant supply of it. The Epistle is about freedom, and freedom is the fruit of forgiveness. Without forgiveness, there is no freedom. Think only of Northern Ireland, the Middle East, or your own family.

Bread and freedom - these are most precious gifts of God, who is, as we sing in the hymn *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*, both

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giving and forgiving. And we need bread and freedom, and we want them. There is a dreadful and deadly lack of both in the world.

Some 25 million people die of hunger each year. Right now, some 850 million people are hungry. In over 42 countries, men and women are executed without any trial, and in some 54 countries, people are arbitrarily detained, jailed without reason.

By the plain standards of bread and freedom, we live in what has been ranked the #1 country in the whole world. We ought to give thanks for this daily bread and gratefully cherish the freedom which is ours. Yet even here, people go hungry, and in our community, in our jails and outside, how many do not enjoy our freedom. We who pray "give **us** this day our daily bread, and forgive **us** our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us" are bound, then, not just to be grateful for all that God has given and

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forgiven, but to give thought to those who lack daily bread and freedom, and to share these gifts of God.

And yet we, who have bread enough and unparalleled freedom, find ourselves still hungry, enslaved in countless ways, unsatisfied. In the end, the bread and the freedom which are our subject today are not of this world, they are of God and his kingdom of heaven. For in both of these readings, we are speaking of heavenly realities. St. Paul speaks of the freedom of that better country, of our common heavenly citizenship. And John paints this fine picture of a family picnic, where all are fed by Christ in that place where there is much grass, and where all are satisfied.

What is this bread? Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me will never hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst.” Only Jesus will satisfy the longing of our hearts and minds and souls.

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What is this freedom? It is not the so-called freedom to be enslaved by our lower passions. It is not the so-called freedom to be addicted to whatever grabs us. This is a spiritual and moral and psychological freedom. It is from the truth as it is in Jesus. It is for this freedom that Christ has set us free.

What we need to hear, then, we who enjoy such an abundance of bread and so great a freedom, is that we are in other respects, without Christ, starving to death and living like slaves.

There is in all and each of us a hunger and a thirst, which nothing in this world can satisfy. The things of this world will either disappoint or addict us. Whether power or learning, alcohol or sex, even family or work, they will either disappoint our longing or addict us. And neither fame nor children will achieve that lasting life we long for. We are starving to death, spiritually. And we are enslaved, in so many ways caught in bad habits, addicted to self-

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destructive behaviours and substances, and we are prisoners of our fears. We are enslaved by the past - our past, and our parents' past - by what we have done, and by what has been done to us. And there seems to be no way out of long-repeated cycles, and no way of escaping the ghosts of days long gone.

The freedom and the bread we long for can come nowhere but from God. God does not want us to starve to death; rather, he would feed us the bread of eternal life. God does not want us to live as slaves; rather, he would free us to serve him. But how do we get from this Egyptian slavery to the freedom of the promised land? Where can we find this bread of eternal life?

Jesus Christ. He took on our hunger and our thirst, and he assumed our slavery and our death, that we might know the satisfaction and freedom and life which are his - and now ours in him for ever. Stand fast in the freedom for which Christ has set us

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free. In Christ, we are the free children of God, no longer slaves to an external law or to internal guilt. We are free! And Christ satisfies our hunger and our thirst at the same cost: “The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” “For my flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed.” It is only that bread broken for us on the cross, and that drink poured out for us on the cross, which can satisfy us.

The cost of our feeding and freedom, the cost of that bread and forgiveness, is the passion and death of Jesus Christ for the world.

There is no way to the Jerusalem above, but through the Jerusalem below of Jesus’ rejection, suffering and death. And the bread that Jesus gives is his flesh, given on the cross for the life of the world.

So our two readings call us to faithful stewardship. First of all, we must think of the faithful stewardship of physical bread and

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worldly freedom. We are bound to give. We are bound to labour in the distribution of bread and for the spread of freedom. But as well, we think of that spiritual bread and freedom, which we must also cherish and share. Don't go back to slavery. Don't start thinking or living as a slave again. Share the bread, which is Jesus come down and broken for the life of the world.

The kingdom of heaven is pictured in today's readings as that place where everyone has food enough and is free. This is, of course, a spiritual reality, and it is our end and our goal. But we are bound to pray and to live out that prayer here: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, so give us this daily our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."