

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, February 25, 2007

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“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” This was the response of Jesus to the devil’s suggestion that he turn stone into bread. It is a quote from the Old Testament, from Deuteronomy 8:3.

There are two stories about food that provide background for understanding what this verse means. The first is the fall of man in Genesis. Food was part of the original sin. Man, with the devil’s help, came to desire that which God’s word expressly forbade. The first humans chose to live by bread alone and neglect the word that came from the mouth of God.

The second story behind our gospel is that of Israel in the Wilderness. God gave Israel manna to eat, but the people were not satisfied. They demanded meat—which God gave them, along with a great plague that killed many (Numbers 11). In Deuteronomy 8:3, Moses explained the purpose of this to Israel: “[God] humbled you and allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna...that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.”

A New Testament episode that shines some light on the meaning of our verse is the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus had not eaten for some time. When his disciples found him, they said, “Rabbi, eat.” But Jesus said to them, “I have food to eat of which you do not know...My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me.” (John 4:31-4). Jesus was sustained by doing the things the Father wanted him to do so that he was not concerned about food.

Now, St. John tells us that Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1f.). Thus, to live not by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God is, in the light of the New Testament, to live by Christ. As Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never hunger. And he who believes in me will never thirst” (John 6:35).

In Philippians, St. Paul describes the ideal disposition. He writes, “I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things, through Christ who strengthens me” (4:12-13). Thus, when we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” we are not only praying for food to eat to sustain our physical life; we are also praying for a daily supply of grace.

It follows from this that we must have a diet of spiritual food, just as we have a diet of physical food. For how can one live by Christ if one does not rise up in the morning to pray, if one does not remember Christ in the day, and if one does not return to Christ in prayer in the evening? How can one live by Christ if one does not come each week to that heavenly feast wherein we receive his body and blood? As Jesus said, “My flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed” (John 6:55).

How can one live by the word of God if one does not read it? Jesus responded to each demonic temptation with a quote from Holy Scripture. He, as the Word, knew the word and thus the demonic deceptions had no power to deceive him. We must make the effort to read and study God’s Word lest we be deceived by the devil’s lies.

The single biggest problem of Christianity in our culture is that many bear the name Christian but pay no serious attention to what the Bible teaches about Jesus and about how we should live. Jesus was clear about the matter: “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

Lent, and the whole enterprise of fasting, is of no use unless it gives a central place to the Bible and to the personal transformation that the biblical message causes in us when we take it seriously. Lent is an opportunity to pay renewed attention to the word of God and do the things we know we ought to do but haven't done. As the epistle says, “Behold, now is the accepted time. Behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:1f).

If we will fast for this season; if we will remove from our lives the excess, the pleasures, the electronics and, above all, the sinful patterns of behavior; if, in their place, we devote ourselves to confession of our sins, to prayer, to the study of God's word and to a renewed concern for the needs of others; we will learn about the food of which Jesus spoke, the food of which the world does not know.

When the Lenten fast is observed with a real pattern of self-denial and a renewal of spiritual discipline, it teaches us that God fills our human emptiness with his own presence. Lent teaches us to live in a manner that is just a bit more detached from this world because we have tasted something better.

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