



BREAD THAT GIVES LIFE

(JOHN 6:51-58)

Some time ago, I read *The Gulag: A History* by Anne Applebaum. The Gulag was the government agency responsible for a vast network of labour camps scattered throughout the old Soviet Union.

It has been described as the Soviet version of the Nazi concentration camps but with significant differences. People were sent to Nazi concentration camps to die; those in the Gulag camps were sent there not to die but as forced labour, to aid the economy. Because the Nazis sent only specific categories of people to the camps (Jews, gypsies, invalids), most Germans felt relatively safe. But in the Soviet Union, anyone could be sent to the camps for any reason. Nobody felt safe. People of all ages lived in constant terror of arrest and deportation.

Between 1929 and 1953, when Stalin died, it is estimated that eighteen million people passed through the camps. Conditions were atrocious. Prisoners were forced to work sixteen-hour days in extreme weather conditions. Violence was rampant. Food was scarce, hunger was constant, and unknown millions died.

Not everybody in the camps starved. For even when there was no food, one staple was usually available: bread. Bread was so important in the life of the camps that former prisoners have described it many times. Sometimes they remember it as badly baked. One prisoner recalled it being so hard it "resembled a brick", and so small it could be eaten "in two bites". Another wrote that it was literally "black" because the bran left in it coloured the bread black and made "the texture coarse". Often it was baked with too much water and was "wet and weighed heavy" so that prisoners received less than their allotted 700 grammes per day. In their desperation, prisoners would brawl over the less watery ends of the loaves.

In the hungrier camps, bread took on almost sacred status, and a special etiquette grew up around its consumption. While camp thieves stole virtually everything else with impunity, the theft of bread was considered particularly heinous and unforgivable. The unwritten law of the camp criminals in Kolyma in north-eastern Russia was: "Steal anything – except the holy bread portion."

Inmates had their own rituals when it came to bread. "If prisoners received bread only once a day, in the morning," wrote Dmitri Panin in his memoirs, "they faced an agonising decision: eat it all at once, or save some until the afternoon. To save the bread risked loss or theft of the precious quarter loaf. On the other hand, a piece of bread was something to look forward to during the day.

"When you get your ration," wrote Panin, "you have an overwhelming desire to stretch out the pleasure of eating it, cutting your bread up evenly into tiny pieces, rolling the crumbs into little balls... Never on any account take more than half an hour to consume your ration. Every bite of bread should be chewed thoroughly, to enable the stomach to digest it as easily as possible so that it gives up to one's organism a maximum amount of energy... if you always split your ration and put aside a part of it for the evening, you are finished. Eat it all at one sitting; if, on the other hand, you gobble it down too quickly, as famished people often do in normal circumstances, you will also shorten your days..." ■

REFLECT

Most of us will find it hard to relate to Dmitri Panin's obsession with bread. For us, bread is no big deal. Our supermarkets are stuffed with food of all kinds. Bread is only one element in our rich diet. Unlike those in the camps or in extreme poverty, bread for us is not a matter of life or death. And so the significance of today's feast of the Body and Blood of Christ can be lost on us.

For those in the Gulag camps, however, bread was not just a symbol of life – it was life. It had a sacred status; even though unblest, they recognised it as holy. It was their most precious possession.

The feast of the Body and Blood of Christ invites us to reflect on the wonderful gift of the Eucharist. It is first and foremost a celebration during which God wondrously nourishes us with God's own life. The body of Christ is our life-giving, soul-nourishing food. It is bread that gives us life. We are to reverence the bread of life with the same awe and care as the starving inmates of the camps treasured the bread that kept them from death. ■

SAY

"Lord, you nourish me with the bread of life. Help me to share that love with those who need it most. Amen"

LEARN

Eucharist comes from the Greek word *Eucharistia*, which means "thanksgiving". Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we give thanks to God for all that God has done for us.

Vatican II teaches us that the Eucharist is the source and the summit of the life and mission of the Church.

DO

Make an effort to visit the Blessed Sacrament whenever you are passing a church.

PRAY

Pray for a deeper appreciation of the gift and the beauty of the Eucharist.

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

He fed them with the finest wheat
and satisfied them with honey from the rock.

GLORIA

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to people of good will.

We praise you,
we bless you,
we adore you,
we glorify you,
we give you thanks for your great glory,
Lord God, heavenly King,
O God, almighty Father.

Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son,
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,
you take away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us;
you take away the sins of the world,
receive our prayer;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father,
have mercy on us.

For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

COLLECT

O God, who in this wonderful Sacrament
have left us a memorial of your Passion,
grant us, we pray,
so to revere the sacred mysteries of your
Body and Blood

that we may always experience in ourselves
the fruits of your redemption.

Who live and reign with God the Father
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

FIRST READING Deuteronomy 8:2-3,14-16

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy.

Moses said to the people: "Remember how
the Lord your God led you for forty years in
the wilderness, to humble you, to test you
and to know your inmost heart – whether
you would keep his commandments or not.
He humbled you, he made you feel hunger,
he fed you with manna which neither you
nor your fathers had known, to make you
understand that man does not live on bread
alone but that man lives on everything that
comes from the mouth of the Lord.

"Do not then forget the Lord your God who
brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of
the house of slavery: who guided you through
this vast and dreadful wilderness, a land of
fiery serpents, scorpions, thirst; who in this
waterless place brought you water from the
hardest rock; who in this wilderness fed you
with manna that your fathers had not known."

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

PSALM

Psalm 147

Response:

O praise the Lord, Jerusalem!
or Alleluia!

1. O praise the Lord, Jerusalem!
Zion, praise your God!
He has strengthened the bars of your
gates,
he has blessed the children within you. (R.)

2. He established peace on your borders,
he feeds you with finest wheat.
He sends out his word to the earth
and swiftly runs his command. (R.)
3. He makes his word known to Jacob,
to Israel his laws and decrees.
He has not dealt thus with other nations;
he has not taught them his decrees. (R.)

SECOND READING 1 Corinthians 10:16-17

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the
Corinthians.

The blessing-cup that we bless is a
communion with the blood of Christ, and the
bread that we break is a communion with the
body of Christ. The fact that there is only one
loaf means that, though there are many of us,
we form a single body because we all have a
share in this one loaf.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

SEQUENCE

Behold the bread of angels, sent
For pilgrims in their banishment,
The bread for God's true children meant,
That may not unto dogs be given:

Oft in the olden types foreshadowed;
In Isaac on the altar bowed,
And in the ancient paschal food,
And in the manna sent from heaven.

Come then, good shepherd, bread divine,
Still show to us thy mercy sign;
Oh, feed us still, still keep us thine;
So may we see thy glories shine
In fields of immortality;

O thou, the wisest, mightiest, best,
Our present food, our future rest,
Come, make us each thy chosen guest,
Co-heirs of thine, and comrades blest
With saints whose dwelling is with thee.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia!

I am the living bread which has come down
from heaven, says the Lord.

Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever.
Alleluia!

GOSPEL

John 6:51-58

A reading from the holy Gospel according to
John.

Jesus said to the Jews:

"I am the living bread which has come
down from heaven.

Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever;
and the bread that I shall give
is my flesh, for the life of the world."

Then the Jews started arguing with one
another: "How can this man give us
his flesh to eat?" they said. Jesus replied:

"I tell you most solemnly,
if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man
and drink his blood,
you will not have life in you.

Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink
my blood

has eternal life,
and I shall raise him up on the last day.
For my flesh is real food
and my blood is real drink.

He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood
lives in me

and I live in him.

As I, who am sent by the living Father,
myself draw life from the Father,
so whoever eats me will draw life from me.
This is the bread come down from heaven;
not like the bread our ancestors ate:
they are dead,
but anyone who eats this bread will live
for ever."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

PROFESSION OF FAITH

I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.

God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with
the Father;

through him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,

(all bow during the next three lines)

and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the
Virgin Mary,
and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under
Pontius Pilate,

he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.

He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord,
the giver of life,

who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is adored
and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and
apostolic Church.

I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness
of sins

and I look forward to the resurrection of the
dead
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

PRAYER OVER THE OFFERINGS

Grant your Church, O Lord, we pray,
the gifts of unity and peace,
whose signs are to be seen in mystery
in the offerings we here present.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood
remains in me and I in him, says the Lord.

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

Grant, O Lord, we pray,
that we may delight for all eternity
in that share in your divine life,
which is foreshadowed in the present age
by our reception of your precious Body and
Blood.

Who live and reign for ever and ever.
Amen.