

# Bread From Heaven

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost √ August 4, 2024

“When is a gift not a gift?” asks the Baron Harkonnen, rhetorically, in the novel and movie *Dune*. The baron asks this question as he is trying to explain to his nephew why something of great value has been taken from their family and given to other people. The answer, which the plot later reveals but I will not further spoil, is, “When you have to fight to keep it” – and do so against enemies you cannot see and odds you cannot rightly calculate. It would be as if you awoke Christmas morning to some candy, an orange, and a new pair of roller skates at the foot of your bed, only to have older boys steal them from you and make you fight to get them back, breaking one of the skatestraps in the process. ‘If that’s Christmas,’ said my father about this, which happened to him once when he was young, ‘You can keep it.’

My father is the youngest of three brothers, and at the age of 96, he’s the last of them still with us. He was six when the Scrooge event happened, and it was his next-older brother Norman, then nine, who went to go and fight the boys to get my father’s Christmas gifts back, plus an extra orange for good measure. He did so, and was caned for it, but so was the thief, by longstanding British custom, and he wasn’t given his orange back, either. Who works harder, or with less recognition, than a middle child? But it was worth it. One of the men in charge of the house repaired the broken skate, and my dad and brother enjoyed the extra orange in front of everyone, and enjoyed that, too. If Paris is worth a Mass, fresh fruit was certainly worth a caning to poor boys in Depression-era Greenwich, and the Home had worked hard to get them.

That’s what they called it, btw., the boys’ home where they lived: the Home. They’d had to move there when their mother died. Their father, my grandfather, worked two, sometimes three jobs to make ends meet, and couldn’t do that and properly care for his

sons by himself; the Home was one of England's attempts to address the needs of the working poor. My grandfather would see them on weekends and holidays, when he could get the time off, and now and then take them with him to the dogs. The greyhound races, that is, which he loved, and at which he looked like was going to the opening of Parliament; as they say, dress for the job you want. (I'd like to meet his tailor.)

The Home was an independent institution set up by the local council and the Congregational Church, and was much improved over its Victorian / Dickensian predecessors. Looking for an outreach project, church? Helping house those who cannot house themselves is not the worst way to live out our faith. We still have the pocket Bible they gave my dad and uncles, inscribed in 1936, for my father, "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet. - Ps 119:105", by an unknown hand. It has the smallest print of any book I know, save the microprinted OED.

The people following Moses to God-knows-where didn't have to fight anyone for the gifts God gave them, certainly not their bread from heaven. Nor did those to whom Jesus gave the Bread of Life, telling them that if they came to him, they would hunger and thirst no more. Which is a bold thing to say, and hard to credit, if we're honest, except metaphorically. I'm not sure he meant it metaphorically.

He may have meant it critically, at least as the gospel of John presents the story. When the people who'd hung on his every word and whom he fed to bursting finally track him down, on the other side of the sea, Jesus is not exactly glad to see them. "You're only looking for me because I gave you a hand-out," he says. "You don't even care why." Then he adds, "Do not work for food that perishes, but for food that endures."

Tell that to the day laborer with hungry mouths to feed, or the farmer in the field growing the food that will, or the fisher on the sea out to catch the same. If they don't work, the people don't eat, as the song says. What good is imperishable food to those who are perishing for want of the earthly kind? Even if our sojourn beneath the moon and stars is but preparation for the life that is to come that we will have with God, that

is no reason for it to be nasty, brutish, short, low on water and short on food. I'm not sure where John is getting his material from to write Jesus's story this, but something here has slipped. If Jesus means it as a metaphor that those who come to him will never hunger or thirst, meaning that their spirit will be so full of joy and peace and wonder than they will never be sad or despairing again, he better also mean it literally. As Gandhi once noted, "There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread." Real bread, that is, ideally in the form of naan or roti or a good French baguette, rice cakes or corn tortillas, fruits of a harvest that was plentiful, even if the laborers were few. If a god can't even do that, of what use is that god?

That was very much the point the Israelites made to Moses in the wilderness, starving on their way to God-knows-where. They begged; God listened. Quail by the score were blown in that evening from the sea, plump, stunned, and easy to catch. The next morning, manna appeared as the dew sublimed, good for making their daily bread. All you can eat, right there. All you have to do is reach out your hand.

"So they ate and they were filled, / for the Lord gave them what they craved" (Ps. 78:29). All's well that ends well, right? Not quite. As Jesus knew, as the people of Israel of his day knew, and as the author of John knew, and as even the psalmist knew, the story in which the Lord gives his hungry people food that they craved is not a happy story. Numbers 11 tells how a plague rose up and killed many of those people *while they were eating the quail*. As Robert Alter sets Psalm 78, vv.30-32:

They were not revolted by their craving,  
their food was still in their mouths,  
when God's wrath went up against them,  
and He killed their stoutest fellows.  
Israel's young men He brought to their knees.  
Even so, they offended still  
and had no faith in His wonders.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (Norton, 2007), 275. Print. My thanks to Don Hague for sharing this text and translation with me.

When is a gift not a gift? Apparently when it's bread, or at least stale quail, from heaven. God kills those who helped themselves to the food God gave them when they cry out about having no food. 'I'll give you something to cry about', the Lord mutters, then turns their sorrow into more sorrow. The Book of Numbers notes that the place where this went down was known thereafter as Kibroth-hattaavah, the Graves of Craving.

It's not quite clear to me how this particular word of the Lord is meant to be a lamp unto our feet or a light unto our path, to turn a bit that verse inscribed in my father's Home Bible (Ps. 119:115). The first step in clarifying the matter, though, is something we heard in Ephesians this morning. After the author's paean to the Job-like patience the church needs as it develops in complexity and maturity, we come to this: "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about...by people's trickery [and] deceitful scheming" (4:14). Instead, "by speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way..." (4:15b). This means not having a faith or belief system that is like that of a child, unaware of the world's complexity or of the side-by-side human capacities for greatness, goodness, pettiness, and evil. It means choosing what is good fully aware that we don't have to and may suffer nothing if we don't. You can't be a child and do that, or a tree, or a squirrel. As Toni Morrison puts it, "You have to be an adult to consciously, deliberately, be good – and that's complicated."<sup>2</sup>

Caning a boy for taking back what others stole from his brother, then letting him keep what he stole from them? It's complicated; doing that today on either side of the pond would get one arrested, and worse. Yet the boys in the Home had to learn to live together, not to steal, not to take violence into their own hands lest it turn into vengeance, but also that doing what you had to to stand up for you and yours could do good even if it also hurt. There would not always be someone around to do it for you,

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<sup>2</sup> See, *inter alia*, [Toni Morrison on her novels: 'I think goodness is more interesting' – The Mail & Guardian \(mg.co.za\)](http://mg.co.za). 2016-02-09. Web. Accessed 8/1/24. The quote comes from a lecture Toni Morrison gave at Harvard Divinity School in 2012 entitled, "Goodness, Altruism, and the Literary Imagination". Text: [Toni Morrison: 'Goodness: Altruism and the Literary Imagination' - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](http://www.nytimes.com). Web. Accessed 8/1/24.

and sometimes you'd have to fight even if you weren't sure you could win. These were the days of Hitler's rise and that of Mussolini, after all, not to mention Stalin and Tojo and, planning a long march somewhere, the future Chairman Mao. It was a hard world these boys would become men in, my father's guardians knew, much harder than the one they'd seen blown to pieces at Passchendaele and the Somme.

Even they could not know how hard – and yet flowers still bloomed in the spring, and apple trees, and in time roses in my grandfather's garden. He remarried not long after what became known in the family as Orange Christmas, and moved the family to the house the boys finished growing up in, though they left as soon as they could; Englishmen and their (step)mothers. Fishers went down to the sea and returned with their nets full, and farmers' fields grew rich again with grain and sheep, and the world learned to heal from its evils, if not how to prevent them forever, or from returning.

For that, we need what Jesus called true bread from heaven, which he was (and is), though that way of putting it isn't easy to understand. We had to eat of his flesh, he told the people, weirding them out. The technical term for that is 'theophagy', eating a god. But that's not the same thing as eating a leg of lamb, as he tried to explain. It's making sure that what God is becomes part of us and never leaves, even when we die.

Jesus knew that we had to take within us what God was and is – Love, with immeasurable power and the need to love, to create, to endure, and to be worthy of itself – until it filled us to overflowing. He knew it, and knew that no-one else could do it for us, and told his people that, too. True bread from heaven, as I said; to consciously, deliberately, be good, even when it hurts or doesn't seem to matter. That's what we need – all of us. No childish faith or adolescent *ennui*, no more con artists' schemes or false prophets' deceiving, and no selfishness. For if all we seek is the bread of this world, or the candy, the oranges, or all the best toys, all we will find at the end of that seeking are Graves of Craving.

That is not, not quite, a lesson for children, even if sometimes it has to be. *Amen.*