

Jesus described himself in several ways. He liked vivid imagery. He said, "I am the good shepherd," and told us that the good shepherd was one who took care of his sheep. He even told us that the good shepherd was one willing to lay down his life for his sheep. Often, he described himself as the "son of man," without really explaining this. In the gospel reading today, Jesus described himself as the "bread of life," bread, he said, that had come down from heaven. He told us that anyone who eats this bread will live forever and the bread that he would give us, for the life of the world, was his own flesh. We know what he meant by this. Jesus knew that he was going to die, but his death would be God's greatest gift to this world.

In both our Lord's day and ours, bread is the staple food, certainly the symbol, if not the essence, of nourishment. Carbohydrates and health consciousness aside, without bread, that is, figuratively, without nourishment, we will die. That part of the Lord's Prayer, the petition where we ask God to "give us this day, our daily bread," acknowledges our dependence on physical nourishment as well as our ultimate dependence on God for the food that we eat and for all of our needs. Jesus' description of himself as the "bread of life" tells us that he is our spiritual food.

Most of us will almost automatically take this understanding a step further. When we read that Jesus said that anyone who eats the bread that he gives will live forever, and this bread of life is his flesh, we immediately think of the Eucharist and the words, "This is my body which is given for you." But even as we think Eucharist, which is so meaningful to us, we understand that we are not ritualistic cannibals. We are talking about soul food in that term's original meaning. We are talking about our spiritual nourishment, the food that feeds the soul, and we are acknowledging that our eternal lives, as well as the life that we live in the here and now, are truly dependent on Christ. If we feed on him, that is if we seek him and give ourselves over to him on a daily basis or, in evangelical terms, surrender ourselves to him and ask him to spiritually nourish and strengthen us each day, as in "give us this day our daily bread," we will thrive spiritually and we will grow strong in Christ. Nothing prepares us better for the trials and tribulations of life than gaining strength in Christ Jesus. No one will stand by us in our darkest hours, the times of our greatest needs, with the same earnestness of the one who said, "Lo, I am with you always."

We can take this imagery of Christ as the "bread of life" further. In the manner in which our Lord used the phrase, this bread actually referred to God's love for us, expressed in God's coming to us in human form and dying for us, so that we might be freed of the burden of sin which is death. We can rephrase the closing lines of today's gospel reading this way, losing nothing but gaining a great deal in understanding. Jesus said, "I am the living love, the very essence of God's love that comes to you, in flesh and blood, from God the Father. Anyone who accepts and dwells in my love will dwell with me in eternity." This is not an exclusive statement, contingent on any merit of our own. The

church long ago dealt with the heresy that claimed that salvation was won by good behavior, although there are always those in the church who never quite get this. Orthodox Christian doctrine insists that God's saving grace, given us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, is a free gift, an expression of God's unconditional love, given to us because salvation is something that we just cannot do on our own. The only requirement is that we accept Jesus as Lord and try to live as he would have us live, lives marked by loving God and loving neighbor.

God's love made present and tangible in the historic Jesus is the love of an invisible God made visible and accessible to our human experience. In Jesus, God the Father offers us an opportunity for a personal relationship with him. When we accept that love, when we embrace Jesus as our personal Redeemer, then the love fills the emptiness of the soul to the point of overflowing. God's love overflows through us to others. Years ago, the leader of the Church of South India, D. T. Niles, defined Christian evangelism in terms of that overflowing love. He said that evangelism is simply one hungry person telling another hungry person where to find bread. Our calling, if we would do the will of the Father, is simply to tell the world where and how to find the love of God in Jesus. *Amen.*