

## **Biblical Reflection: Hungry for Daily Bread, Hungry for Justice?**

**By Brian Lim**

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (Matthew 5:6)*

*Let your Kingdom come, let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.... (Matthew 5:10-12)*

*They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. (Isaiah 65:21-23)*

“Good News! The Divine Son has brought salvation to the world, establishing a new world order of peace and stability, fruitfulness and prosperity. He provides for the needs of his people, granting bread to those who have faith in him... our Lord Caesar!” Sound familiar?

Hunger in Jesus’ time was not a simple problem of producing sufficient food, just as the food security issues of our world today are also intimately connected to issues far beyond food production. Hunger, whether for daily bread, or for righteousness, needs to be examined with an understanding of how the daily life in Galilee was affected by living in the shadow of an empire. This was an empire that claimed to bring the gospel (good news) of peace, a dawning of a new age and new world order. This was the Pax Romana, supported by the civil religion of the Roman Imperial Cult that hailed Caesar as the divine son, “the ‘Saviour’ who had brought ‘salvation’ to the whole world” (Richard Horsley, from *Jesus and Empire*).

While the Pax Romana was “rooted in a story of peace, proclaiming that Rome was the bearer of cosmic peace, fertility and prosperity” (Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat, from *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*), this new world order was instead experienced as disorienting and disruptive by many of its subject peoples. Many of the people who worked the land were forced into indebtedness due to the crushing rents, taxes and tributes (in the form of grain) paid to landlords, rulers, and the temple for the imperial cult, backed by the military power of the Roman legions. Landlessness increased as traditional family lands were sold to pay off debt, forcing many into the insecurity of working as tenant labourers, and the disparity between rich and poor steadily widened. Rome at this time had a population of over a million, of which 30 percent were slaves and resident aliens. To feed and supply the occupying forces responsible for projecting power over the empire as well as the urban citizens, resources and food poured into Rome and other metropolises from the conquered peoples and provinces (primarily from Egypt and North Africa). The total wheat imports to Rome were estimated to be between 200,000 and 400,000 tons annually. The imperial system with its stratification of wealth, privilege and power was maintained through fusing the mythology of Caesar as Saviour and benefactor with the social patronage system: those citizens of Rome who, along with their households, demonstrated their faith and allegiance in the divine Lord, Caesar, were granted favours, gifts of grain (“daily bread”) from their patrons, the emperor and Roman elite. Horsley writes that “grain was doled out to an estimated 250,000 male citizens, affecting (if not completely feeding) around 670,000 people” in Rome under Augustus. We can see then, how this political economic system, an early form of globalization, served to feed the appetites and preoccupation with material wealth of an urban elite at the expense of distant agricultural populations. For these geographically and economically marginalized peoples, the new world order was experienced as debt, food insecurity, rootlessness and community disruption, and social division on the basis of race and class.

It is with this backdrop of grinding poverty, food insecurity and oppressive debt that Jesus taught his disciples to pray: “...*Let your Kingdom come, let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors...*” Though the words of this prayer may seem unremarkable to us today because of the familiarity of repetition, can we hear the subversive undertones that Jesus’ disciples and other followers may well have heard? To pray for the Kingdom to come was to hope for the in-breaking of an alternative new world order, one where God would put everything right (socially, economically, spiritually), not a kingdom or empire of social and economic divisions maintained by military coercion. The confession of early Christians that ‘Jesus is Lord’

meant that Caesar was not Lord. In a context of food security brought about at least partly by an exploitative economic system, to pray that God would grant daily bread was to recognize God as ultimate benefactor and patron, not Caesar. To pray for daily bread was to remember a different story, a story of God providing daily manna in the wilderness, in a journey of liberation out of bondage. And to pray that debts might be forgiven was not only a petition for God to forgive them and release them from the oppression of sin, it was to express a yearning for Jubilee release from crushing debt (Leviticus 25) - the good news for the poor, the Year of the Lord's favour, that Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue as being fulfilled in his very person (Luke 4:18-19).

The Pax Romana was an empire rooted in an idolatrous ideology, a mythology of peace and manifested in an economics of oppression. What are the entities or systems which act as empires in the world today? Economic globalization (global market capitalism) is one such system: it is rooted in its own mythology – the story of inevitable economic and technological progress, promising to deliver peace and abundance – but in practice benefits the wealthy elite at the expense of the poor, the industrialized nations at the expense of countries in the global South dependent on agriculture. The enormous debt burden of many developing countries leads to a constant flow of capital out of these countries primarily to the West as debt repayment and interest payments, diverted away from social spending (e.g. Tanzania spends 9 times more on debt repayments than on healthcare, 4 times more than on education). Structural adjustment programs imposed on these countries by external financial institutions emphasized social spending cuts and trade liberalization, and encouraged cash crop agriculture (e.g. coffee, bananas, cocoa) for export to the urban consumers of the North, rather than food production for household consumption or domestic markets. Many of these cash crop industries are dominated by huge trans-national corporations who control access or use to large areas of agricultural land – half the cropland in Central America is used for coffee cultivation, while world production of bananas for export is controlled by just 4 companies. Farmers often must work as underpaid wage labourers on large plantations, exposed to pesticides and other chemicals used for unsustainable production practices which lead to long-term environmental degradation. Volatile and decreasing commodity prices on the world market for cash crops contribute to increased income instability and food insecurity. Industrialized countries engage in trade practices such as “dumping”, exporting commodities at low prices, which further depresses prices that farmers receive for their produce. Other products by developing countries may face entry barriers to the markets of industrialized countries in the form of high tariffs. We are complicit in an “empire” characterized by massive flows of food and resources from the poor to the wealthy, unequal and exploitative economic relationships, and experienced by many around the world as debt, poverty, and malnutrition.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) and the visions of the prophet Isaiah present images of a new world order characterized and oriented by the values of the Kingdom of God. Isaiah envisioned a world where security is experienced when people enjoy the fruit of their own efforts, whether it be the homes that they build or the food that they grow, without the fear or uncertainty that their houses or food will be taken away and given to others to enjoy. Jesus called on his hearers to hunger and thirst for righteousness – not to aspire for sinless perfection, but to ardently long for a world put to right by God, a world oriented towards justice, fairness, generosity, and compassion. Do we hunger and thirst for justice too? Do we only pray for daily bread, so that the hungry might have enough to eat today? Or do we also pray that God's will might be done on earth as in heaven, that our global economic systems, international trade practices and our own consumption patterns might be transformed and molded by these life-giving visions of the Kingdom, making it possible for all to have enough?

*To those who hunger, give bread; and to those who have bread, give the hunger for justice. (Latin American prayer)*

**References:**

Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder, Richard A. Horsley, Fortress Press, 2002  
Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire, Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, InterVarsity Press, 2004