

A View from the Pew

Bread

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It's September, of 2021 and the Church is on the home stretch to Christmas. This time of year always turns my thoughts to those things that hold us together.

I consider here the place of bread in our culture, our very essence. Its linguistic roots literally mean *life*. But, apart from the manna of the Bible, bread did not spring into existence fully formed. Rather, the many intermediate steps were the product of human intervention.

Shakespeare slyly observed the considerable distance bread has come from base grain over time:

PANDARUS

Well, I have told you enough of this: for my part,
I'll not meddle nor make no further. He that will
have a cake out of the wheat must needs tarry the grinding.

TROILUS

Have I not tarried?

PANDARUS

Ay, the grinding; but you must tarry
the bolting.

TROILUS

Have I not tarried?

PANDARUS

Ay, the bolting, but you must tarry the leavening.

TROILUS

Still have I tarried.

PANDARUS

Ay, to the leavening; but here's yet in the word
'hereafter' the kneading, the making of the cake, the
heating of the oven and the baking; nay, you must
stay the cooling too, or you may chance to burn your lips.

Troilus and Cressida, Act I, Scene 1

The many steps from grain to table are often invisible to most of us. Bread is a ubiquitous symbol of human ingenuity. The evolution from grain to bread did not happen in a twinkling, of course. Each step from the sowing of the seed to the grinding, wetting, rising, and baking of the grain added nutrition, palatability, and portability to the product. Each, though, was the product of accident, experiment, and knowledge accreted over generations.

Bread, was, and is, at its foundation an economic phenomenon, yet its very image binds us as a community. One finds among the more splendid tombs of 1st century B.C. Rome, that of Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces whose epitaph reads *Est hoc monumentum Marcei Vergilei Eurysacis pistoris redemptoris, apparet*, which translates to “This is the tomb of Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces, baker, contractor, it’s obvious!” The tomb also includes a frieze illustrating 41 men, each acting out a separate stage of the bread production process. Rome had by then adopted no fewer than twelve helper gods to the goddess Ceres, who oversaw grain. These helpers were each responsible for a stage of grain production associated with the early agricultural steps toward bread making, during the parts of the process that nature still controlled and in which humans had a less direct hand:

- Vervactor: The god of the first tilling of the soil.
- Reparator: The god who prepared the earth.
- Imporcitor: The god that made wide furrows.
- Insitor: The god of seed planting.
- Obarator: The god who covered the plowed earth.
- Occator: The god of harrowing.
- Serritor: The god of digging.
- Subruncinator: The god of weeding.
- Messor: The god who reaped the harvest.
- Convector: The god who carried the grain from the fields.
- Conditor: The god who stored the grain.
- Promitor: The god who distributed the grain.

Bread, and especially the art of its baking, had an outside role in the culture, the economy, and the social rules of the time. The leadership of Rome had, after all, conquered the entire known world and had become superb administrators, but, as it turns out, woefully inept economists. The enormous concentration of wealth among fewer and fewer noble Romans who aggregated Rome’s only real wealth – land – in their own hands, coupled with the relentless migration of the newly landless former farmers to the cities, meant that virtually no bread was of Italian provenance any longer. Rather, grains had to be imported from the provinces. In particular, the fertile Nile valley became the veritable breadbasket for Italy. By the time the Flavians ascended the throne in Rome, bread makers were state employees, and able to neither enter – nor leave – the bread baking business without official permission.

The wealthy large estate owners underpriced their goods, quickly put the small farmers out of business, and bought up their land, merging the small farmers’ former properties with their own. In addition to eliminating from the society any semblance of a middle class, the growth of these *latifundia*, which were uniformly repurposed to more profitable cattle and sheep farming, and the migration of the small farmers and their families to the cities where they could reliably receive regular government distributions of free food (a practice established with considerable discipline by Augustus (63 B.C. – A.D. 14), who observed that the notions of emperor and bread were interchangeable among the masses) so reduced the grain productivity of the land that Rome could no longer feed itself.

By then, the *plebs frumentaria*, the tidal wave of unemployed former farmers who had moved to the cities in search of the government dole for themselves and their families, exceeded 200,000, and the emperor was obliged to adopt a new set of priorities to avoid civil war:

1. Continue to provide bread for the swelling masses of the homeless, jobless, former farmers
2. Provide bread for his own bodyguards and
3. Hold enough grain in reserve to counter the inevitable price inflation brought about by grain speculators attempting to corner the market. Only in Egypt, from which most of the reliable grain imports came, were such speculators outlawed

A century and a half before the birth of Jesus, a respected Roman gave voice to the growing plight of the retired soldiers who made up the bulk of the small hold farmers through the land grants they had been given as pensions. Scipio Africanus had conquered the Carthaginians in 202 B.C. and, fifty years later, Tiberius Gracchus, his grandson, made a speech that powerfully presaged the words of the coming Nazarene:

The wild beasts of Italy have their caves or nests. But the men who fought for Italy, who were ready to die for her as soldiers, have at most a share in her air and light, but neither house nor roof to shelter them. They must wander about from place to place with their wives and children. These warriors are called masters of the world, but not a square foot of earth in this world belongs to them.

The similarities to the words of Jesus referenced in Chapter 8 of Matthew and Chapter 9 of Luke, are unmistakable:

Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

The wealth polarization that resulted from Rome’s transactional, and unplanned, economy, had, by Jesus’s time, reached all of the Roman provinces, and his proposition of a more equitable distribution of resources was not lost on his contemporaries. Grain was being shipped out of the Middle East to Rome to feed both the controlling patrician class and the rising plebian masses. Hunger was becoming a worldwide experience; widely shared but acknowledged only by the poor.

Pliny, the Elder (A.D. 23 - A.D. 79) made what amounted to the first economic analysis of Rome’s shortsighted treatment of capital when he wrote in his Natural History, “*Latifundia perdidere Italiam, iam vero et provincias.*” [The great landholdings have destroyed Italy, and later, the whole empire]. The practice of concentrating the principal capital assets of a region (here, the land) into the hands of a few, and exploiting those assets with slave labor, thereby destroying the middle class, would yield, inevitably, the insatiable need to grow those asset holdings ever larger. Not incidentally, America experienced this phenomenon in its antebellum South, and with similar destructive results.

Fully a quarter of the grain produced in Judea was commandeered by Rome. The land was beset with a shortage of food. It is by no literary accident, then, that Matthew and John describe the first of Jesus's temptations in the wilderness as to turn stones into bread. In reply, Christ invokes Moses's explanation of the appearance of manna to the wandering tribes. Jesus knew this: If he took up the challenge to turn stones into bread, he would be proclaimed an earthly king and supplant Augustus. This would have summarily undermined his spiritual mission.

The imagery of bread follows Jesus's mission throughout the Bible. In Matthew, the sole material thing Jesus instructs us to pray for is *ἄρτον*, or bread, in the context of food. Provision of bread for the hungry traveler outweighs the social convention of not waking one's neighbor in the middle of the night (Luke 11:5-8) and even the law against taking the sacred bread of the temple, which David violates by deception in 1 Samuel 21:1-9 and which event is invoked by Jesus in all three synoptic gospels (Mark 2:23-28; Matthew 12:1-8; Luke 6:1-5) to illustrate the reality of human need over ritualistic dogma.

While Jesus declined to indulge the devil by turning the stones into bread, he did not hesitate to produce enough bread for five thousand stragglers out of the noble motive of compassion. Resistance to pity is more difficult than resistance to the devil. Emotional communion with others provided Jesus with credibility and serves as the foundation of our faith.

This, perhaps, provides some context to Augustus's apparently abrupt pronouncement that "all the world should be taxed." He needed more money, lots of it, and right away, to buy food for the increasingly restive populace. Mary and Joseph's sojourn to Beth-Lehem, or House of Bread, was the result. Jesus was born into simple means, thereby assuring no expectations that His mission was to deliver worldly wealth. The heraldic star viewed by the magi announced that this child was special in other ways that no one could yet anticipate.

In Egyptian Arabic, the words for life and bread are the same – *aish*. The meanings became inextricably entangled millennia ago. They become even more entangled today whenever any of us breaks or bakes bread in order to share it.