

Comfort Food

"I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." --John 6:35

In his book entitled God's Psychiatry, Charles Allen tells this story: As World War II was drawing to a close, the Allied armies gathered up many hungry orphans. They were placed in camps where they were well-fed. Despite excellent care, they slept poorly. They seemed nervous and afraid. Finally, a psychologist came up with the solution. Each child was given a piece of bread to hold after he was put to bed. This particular piece of bread was just to be held—not eaten. The piece of bread produced wonderful results. The children went to bed knowing instinctively they would have food to eat the next day. That guarantee gave the children a restful and contented sleep.

Bread has always been and remains the most basic human need for security for most peoples in most places. We Armenians are certainly no exception. Sadly, we have experienced countless times in our long history, the plight of the hungry orphans in the story above. So no one has to tell Armenians of the importance of bread as security—it is encapsulated in our cultural DNA—our language and heritage. In our language the word for bread, հաց (hats), is also the word for all food. Our culture has dozens of traditions and sayings reminding successive generations of the significance of bread, such as «Որտեղ հաց, այնտեղ կաց». "Wherever there's bread; Stay there!"

In today's gospel reading, Jesus says something astonishing to Armenians, to WW II orphans or any person who has ever hungered. "I am the bread of life," Jesus says, "he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." On the surface, these words have lost something of their power for us who eat whatever and whenever we want, whose bellies are always full. However, Jesus is not just speaking about physical hunger. Remember that the orphans in our story were unwell even after they were being well fed. For it is not the lack of bread itself that damages a person, it is the fear of not having enough, of not being secure in a family and community, of not being secure in a God who loves us. Ironically, this deeper moral and spiritual hunger plagues our society more than ever, which has all the food it needs. Yet people are starving; literally starving for connection, for purpose, for intimacy and transcendence, but fill themselves instead with junk which is bad for the body and the soul.

Well for all of us who are hungry for a more fulfilled life with a higher purpose, for all of us who want to grow in our faith – and I assume we all do or we wouldn't be here –we need spiritual nourishment, we need Christ the bread of life. Christ gives himself (that's what "flesh and blood" means – his very self) not just an idea or a teaching. He gives himself for us to take in, to be nourished and transformed; to become like him.

In some old Catholic churches, when the priest holds up the bread before inviting people to receive communion, He says, "Behold what you are; become what you receive." The phrase comes from a sermon by St Augustine, and it affirms that we are the Body of Christ, and at the same time we are to become more and more like Jesus. That's why we come together on Sundays, we read and listen and pray, we serve each other with compassion, we receive the sacraments. It's all about nourishing ourselves with the life of Christ, and sharing this bread with others. Indeed, when we come together in worship on Sundays and receive the bread of life, we eat well, very well.

But what do we do about all the other days of the week? "Give us this day our daily bread." «զհաց մեր հանապազորդ տուր մեզ այսօր» we pray. And with this prayer which Jesus gave us, we acknowledge our need for daily sustenance from Our Lord, which we get by sitting with Him in study, in prayer, in silence, even if just for a few minutes a day. If we can do this, we might find ourselves like the hungry orphans, who by merely holding on to Jesus, the bread of life, find ourselves mysteriously and deeply filled, no matter what pangs of hunger, what times of trial we encounter along our journey, now and always; amen.