

Empty Stomachs and Broken Lives

by Ravi Zacharias (ABRIDGED)

Earth's *crammed* with heaven,
And every common bush *afire* with God;
But only he who *sees* takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

So said the poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Her lament takes us back to the Old Testament, when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and issued a call to him that he might lead his people out of slavery into a land flowing with milk and honey. That epiphany, as Browning points out, was not for Moses' culinary delight. No more, I might add, than the thunder and lightning that enveloped Sinai when God spoke was so that the people could enjoy the glow on the landscape.

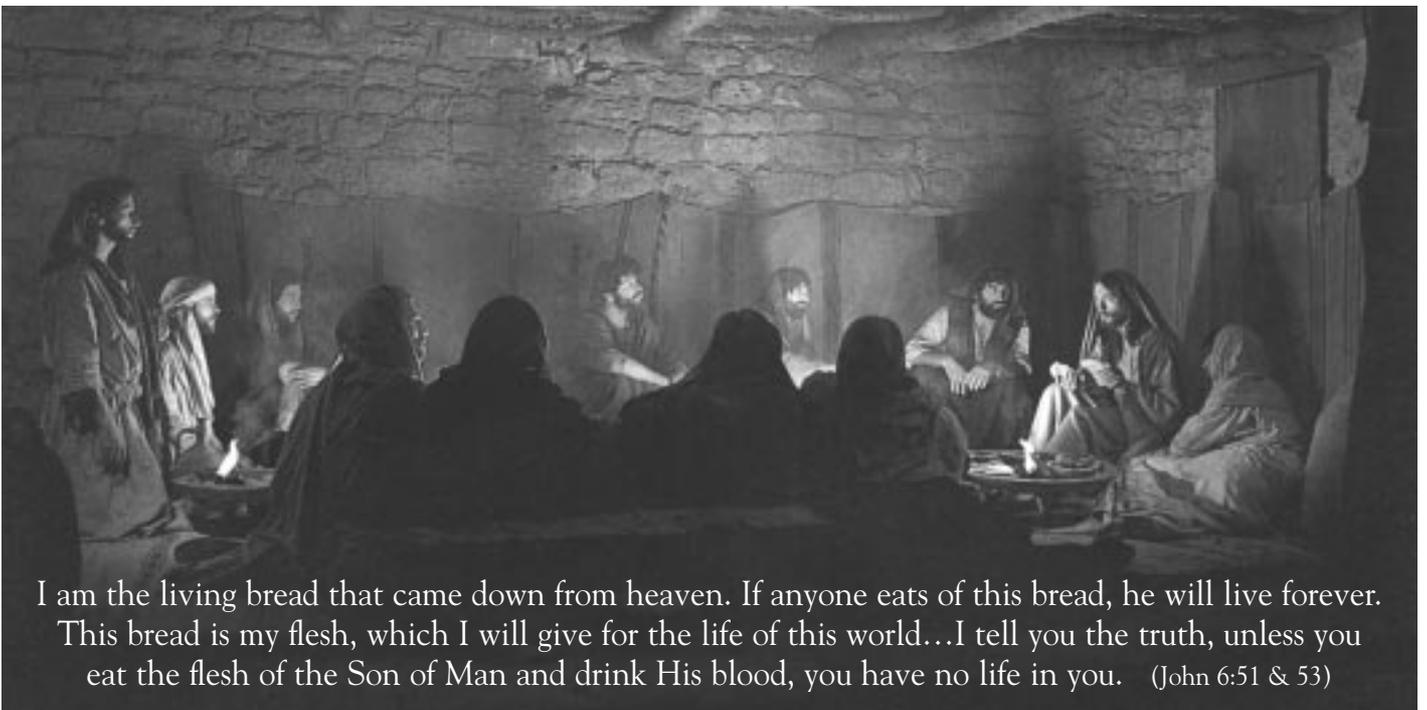
The dazzling, almost fearsome accompaniment of the elements pointed beyond the portents to the One who controlled those elements. How inconceivable was the loss for the people when the signs became the ends in themselves and the One signified became the means. The God who came near was lost amid their fascination with the special effects. The mistake has been repeated in virtually every human life.

And so it was that centuries after the event people were still locked into that



BE Still.

THOUGHTS AND READINGS FOR MEDITATION



I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of this world...I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. (John 6:51 & 53)

*"Thou dost not give away the children's bread. Surely then,
Thou keepest it for the children. Give it now to us."*

"CAN GOD FURNISH A TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS?" PSALM 78:19

blindness. The crowd in Jesus' ministry came with a one-upmanship challenge to Him, to match the manna from heaven that Moses gave his people. They were not expecting an answer anywhere near as jarring as His: "This is my body...Take eat." "This is my blood...Drink all of it." Between their expectation and His provision was a wide chasm and they started to leave without seeking an explanation. Jesus asked His disciples if they were going to leave Him, too. Was this all too much for them to comprehend? After His death they would re-live those moments and remember what He said.

MISREADING THE SCRIPT

Jesus was not speaking in a cultural vacuum, consigning the Hebrew world to cannibalism. His words were intended to lift the listeners from their barren, food-dominated existence to the recognition of the supreme hunger of life that would be filled by different bread. It was under Moses He had first reminded them that physical bread had limited sustenance. He wanted to meet a greater hunger, but they walked away from Him, still starved. **It is just that response that leaves every human being bereft of life's real meaning.**

Our hunger for something transcendent is rooted in our very being, yes, even in our physical entity. That may be why we cannot shrug off this hunger, however hard we try. Even some of the best minds have not paused long enough to really hear what Jesus was teaching here and understand what life-transforming power is contained in this truth. They sit round instead, as philosophers or critics, and "eat blackberries."

What preceded this demand by the crowd to bring down food from heaven? With several miracles, Jesus had revealed His power over the elements, over sickness, over all provision and over Natural Law. The people and the disciples who saw Jesus perform the miracle of feeding the multitude sought the power that they assumed would make life more delectable—to ensure a full stomach and a limitless supply of bread. Who could fault them? (A man who won an enormous sum in a lottery was asked, "What is the biggest difference in your life?" "I eat out more often," came the disappointing answer.)

Food and power blinded the mind to the need for nourishment and strength for the soul. The generosity of God became a stumbling block because the witnesses lost sight of the purpose, longing only for the outward manifestations. They wanted to know how a little boy's lunch could feed several thousand people and there still be baskets full of crumbs left over. How could a paralytic of nearly four decades suddenly walk again? Is this power transferable? Can it be bought? The possibility of freedom from hunger and disease would draw a following anywhere. And that precisely was the context through which Jesus was trying to lift their sights to higher causes. They were no different from us. Jesus' response to their demand is a stark contrast to the self-aggrandisement that would-be messiahs covet. Rather than bask in their praise, or enlarge His following, Jesus slipped away and wept over their self-deception. He knew their motives and the misconceptions with which they lived. And when they somehow tracked Him down they burst upon

Him with a question, "Our fathers ate manna in the desert... Why don't you give us the same?"

Jesus began His answer that was to lead them farther than they were willing to go.

IGNORING THE AUTHOR

It is not surprising that the first temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness was to change stones into bread. "Do this," said Satan, "and the world will follow you." This was not a soft temptation. The tempter knew, precisely, the force of his taunt. How much more relevant could God be than to be a provider of food for life? What good is religion if it cannot feed the hungry? Satan was perilously close to the truth but engulfed it in a lie of devastating proportions.

Ask yourself! What kind of a following would result if the sole reason for the affection towards the leader is that he provides his followers with bread? Both motives would be wrong—for the provider and also for the receiver.

The temptation Satan posed to Jesus stalked Him throughout His ministry—politics of power through abundance is not a new invention. Jesus took pains to show them that their preoccupation with bread as the primary purpose and expression of enjoyment of life had seriously displaced both what bread was meant to do and what life was meant to be.

In our highly competitive world this truth does not sink in with any greater ease than it did in ancient Palestine. "You are what you eat," we hear in various ways. Jesus would have said, "You are more than what you eat." With all our consumption, our hungers are still many. Our fulfillments are few. Our hungers are displaced.

The play *Our Town* tells the story of life lived out in the mundane, amid the relationships of daily living. The lesson is like a mirror held out to all of us. The milk arrives, breakfast is eaten, working people go to their jobs, housewives tidy their homes, handymen work in the yards—each day reflecting the previous one. In the story the turning point comes when Emily Gibbs dies giving birth to her baby and the routine is suddenly broken.

But from the realm of the dead, Emily is given a chance to return to earth for a day of her choice so she can enjoy it once again, this time through nostalgic eyes. She watches the harried activity and preparation going on in celebration of her twelfth birthday. As expected, the household is preoccupied with presents and food and chatter, but from the sidelines Emily notices the complete loss of any personal attention that would make her day and life meaningful. The attention of everyone is on the occasion, not on the person and the relationships. She is appalled at such neglect. From the unseen, she pleads, "Just for a moment we're happy. Let's look at one another." But her plaintive cry is unheeded. They are trapped in the superficial. As she bids her final farewell, she cries, "Oh, Earth, you're too wonderful for anyone to realise you!" Then she turns to the stage manager, and asks, "Do any human beings ever realise life while they live it—every, every moment?" The answer comes, "No. The saints and poets, maybe—they do some."

"Do any realise life while they live it?" Life is not a matter of nutrition alone but of the greater hunger that is beyond words and food. Only when it is filled by that which satisfies a

hunger that is both physical and spiritual in a mutuality that sustains without violation, a satisfaction that is authentic and continuous, can life be truly fulfilling. If the pursuit of bread dominates our dreams and actions, life, as it was meant to be, passes us by and our unsatisfied hungers continue to scream out at us.

"The saints and poets, maybe—they do some,"—because they slow down and think, and look beyond the activities to their longings and somehow broach the possibility of meaning that transcends their actions.

Jesus has a similarly striking question. Does any one of us live every minute of life, knowing its essential worth? How is it possible that we spend all of our energies pursuing the work-a-day world and actually conclude that if our stomachs are full life's sustenance will be met? We seek bread not just to consume it, but to be in a position of power, envied by others for the abundance we have acquired. In short, if we are to truly understand who we are we must understand what bread can and cannot do.

In the middle of all those miracles was actually an event of far greater import—Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman. He had tried to open up the understanding of their minds towards what was really the substance of life. He had a brilliant lead-in, but evidently the disciples missed His point. They were completely preoccupied with their lunch-bags. He was talking to an immoral, ostracised and desperate woman whose life had been used and abused till she had no sense of self-worth left. They chided Him for talking to her. "You must be hungry," they said. "Is it not time to eat?"

"I have food to eat that you know nothing about. My food is to do the will of my Father."

There is the first remarkable pointer. If I am to be fulfilled I must pursue a will that is greater than mine—one that has the will of God as its focus, not the appetite of the flesh. He went on to say: "Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest." Here is our next clue. Jesus pointed to a hunger that was of universal proportion and went beyond bread and water.

Every sentence of His response had food in it, but of a different kind. There was hunger everywhere, He said, and food enough for all—it was Christ Himself, the bread of life and the spring of living water. The Samaritan woman gasped what He said with a fervour that came from her desperation.

The transaction was fascinating. She had come with a bucket. He sent her back with a **spring** of living water. She had come as a reject. He sent her back being **accepted** by God Himself. She came wounded. He sent her back **whole**. She came laden with questions. He sent her back as a source for **answers**. She came living in quiet desperation. She ran back overflowing with **hope**. And the disciples missed the obvious imperative. Shortly after this, He fed the thousands. He was moving them from the easier to the more difficult, from the temporal to the eternal, from the inward look to outward reverence. But they were stuck on their desire for more food. They did not get it the first time round.

RAISING THE CURTAIN

In the sixth chapter of John, Jesus added a very dramatic element. Life is filled with many

legitimate hungers: hungers for truth, love, knowledge, belonging, expression, justice, significance, and hungers of imagination and the mind. Here is the point. Some of our individual pursuits may meet some of these hungers but the message of Jesus affirms that no one thing will meet all of them. Furthermore, none can help us know whether the way we fulfill them is legitimate or illegitimate, until we feed on the bread of life that Jesus offers. That nourishment defines the legitimacy of all else.

Not only do we remain unfulfilled when we pursue these hungers, but there comes a disorientation that misrepresents and misunderstands where the real satisfaction comes from.

In his book *Into Thin Air*, Jon Krakauer relates the hazards that plagued the climbers in the expeditions to Mount Everest in 1996. Some circumstances were out of their control but mistakes resulted in a great loss of lives. And some of those deadly mistakes were made while within reach of solutions.

One of the leaders was in desperate need of oxygen. Though he was surrounded by a cache of oxygen canisters, he kept radioing that they were empty. Those who had passed by on their return from the summit knew that they were full. Even as they pled with him on the radio to use them, it was to no avail. The lack of the very thing he needed so disoriented his mind that though he was surrounded by a restoring supply he continued to complain of its absence. The very thing he held in his hand was absent in his brain and ravaged his capacity to recognize what he had in his hand.

What oxygen is to the body, the bread of life is to the soul. Without that bread all other hungers will be improperly perceived. In fact, in like manner, the absence of that bread over a prolonged period makes the bread itself seem worthless. Life is meant to be lived in fulfillment of the one need that defines all other means of fulfillment and the one love that defines all other loves.

In His answer, Jesus moved very cautiously from the physically felt to the existentially yearned. He moved them from the exterior of substance to the substance of their inner being—from the wrapping to the gift. Here, He reminded them, the physical and the spiritual meet. Here the now and the forever converge. Here life and death co-mingle. Implicit in these verses is the climactic direction towards which Jesus was headed and to which He was to come back moments before His death.

To the middle-eastern mind-set, bread is not just a source of *nourishment*. Jesus Himself, in Revelation 3:20, says that He stands at the door and knocks; if anyone opens that door, He will come in and eat with him. What a beautiful expression that is of *friendship*. And the return of the prodigal was *celebrated* by the killing of the fatted calf. Food is also a medium of *pleasure*. Solomon's palace thrived on such offerings. To this day, food is a big thing in that culture, as it is in this culture. It is the means to **nourishment, friendship, celebration and pleasure.**

But there come those crossroad moments in our lives when no food can sustain life, no friendship can overcome certain eventualities, no celebration can be endless and no pleasure perfect. There are built-in limitations with

food. The body weakens and someday dies. Food with its means of nourishment, friendship with its bonds, celebration with its occasions and pleasure with its delights, for each life and each relationship is ended in a matter of a moment.

It is to this vulnerability of living that Jesus points His finger.

GOING BACK STAGE

There is a second but not so obvious truth. "I am the bread of life," said Jesus. "He who comes to me will never go hungry, and He who believes in me will never be thirsty." Notice the power implicit in the claim.

At the heart of every major religion is a leading exponent. Whatever we make of their claims, one reality is inescapable. They are teachers who point to their teaching or show some particular way of living. By contrast, Jesus did not only teach His message, He was identical with it. "In Him dwelt the fullness of the Godhead bodily." He did not just proclaim the truth. He said, "I am the Truth." He did not just show a way. He said, "I am the Way." He did not just open up vistas. He said, "I am the door." "I am the Good Shepherd." "I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the I Am." That is why for a Christian it is not just a way of feeding and living. **Following Christ begins with a way of relating and being.**

Let us use Buddhism as a specific example. It is often very simplistically defined as a religion of compassion and ethics. The truth is that there is probably no system of belief more complex than Buddhism. While it starts off with the four noble truths on suffering and its cessation, it then moves to the eightfold path on how to end suffering. But as one starts to enter the eightfold path, there emerge hundreds upon hundreds of other rules to deal with contingencies.

We must be clear that in a non-theistic system, such as Buddhism, ethics become central and the rules are added ad infinitum. Buddha and his followers are the originators of these rules.

A prayer for forgiveness, from the Buddhist Common Prayer, reflects this numerical maze:

I beg leave! I beg leave... May I be freed at all times from the Four States of Woe, the Three Scourges, the Eight Wrong Circumstances, the Five Enemies, the Four Deficiencies, the Five Misfortunes, and quickly attain the Path, the Fruition, and the Noble Law of Nirvana, Lord.

To truly understand this complicated theory one would almost need a graduate level understanding in philosophy and psychology.

By contrast, in a very simple way, Jesus drew the real need of His audience to that hunger which was spiritual in nature, a hunger that is shared by every human, so that we are not human livings or human doings but human beings. **We are not in need merely of a superior ethic, we are in need of a transformed will that seeks to do the will of God.**

Teaching, at best, is like a mirror. It can show you if your face is dirty, but the mirror will not wash your face.

Jesus also taught and held up a mirror, but by His person He transforms our will to seek His. **It is our being that Jesus wants to feed.** Christ warns that there are depths to our hungers that the physical does not plumb. There are heights

to existential aspirations that our activities cannot attain. There are breadths of need that the natural cannot span.

He is the bread of life that eternally sustains. And He does it as no other claimant to divine or prophetic status ever did.

EXPLAINING THE PLOT

Jesus now comes to the thought that they needed to carefully consider, and there is nothing in any other religion that would even come close to this profound teaching.

Our greatest hunger, as Jesus described it, is for a consummate relationship that combines awe, love, a transformed will, celebration and commitment. In other words, that hunger is for worship. But worship is not accomplished only by a transaction uttered in a prayer or a wish.

Worship is a posture of life that takes as its primary purpose the understanding of what it really means to love and reverence God. This is where the broken piece of bread provided the means of expression and transaction.

On my first visit to the Kingdom of Jordan, my family and I were hosted to a very special meal on the eve of our departure. They called it **Mensef**. The guests stood around a large platter of rice, beautifully garnished with succulent delicacies, flavoured with aromatic spices and a gravy that gave it a mouth-watering taste. But then came the fun part. We all rolled up our sleeves and together enjoyed the meal from that tray, eating it with our bare hands. The enjoyment of a delightful combination of food, the fellowship one with the other, the touch of the hand into the same platter—signifying trust and closeness, the celebration of life and its purpose, the memories of days we had spent together—every detail came together to say, "Welcome to our home and become one of us." We had gathered as friends and left with an intimate trust of a deeper friendship.

That is only an inkling of what Jesus was offering to His followers. An emptiness that is unexplainable without God is part of every one of us. Logic tells us that. If I am hungry, there must be such a thing as food. If I am thirsty, there must be water. If I am empty in my spirit, only God is big enough to fill it. Even atheistic religions like Buddhism still smuggle in ways of worship where a personal being is addressed, only because the emptiness within drives the self to a transcendent personal other.

This emptiness has deep ramifications. We search for thrills here and there and when each thrill is consummated our emptiness intensifies. The reason is that we are more than just empty. We are, in fact, broken. We have broken away from God, we are broken in relation to our fellow human beings. And the most elusive reality is that we are broken even from ourselves. This is at the core of the Gospel. We have come apart from all the moorings that God had put in place for our wellbeing. To this brokenness He brings the answer. But the answer is not just a simplistic "come and get fed."

"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you."

Upon hearing this the disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it."

But Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to

where He was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe.”

If this were all Jesus had said on the subject, I have no doubt it would have been the supreme puzzle of His teaching. But like many of Jesus' discourses, He gave them piecemeal until the final moment. Then the disciples harked back to the first instance when He hinted at the truth. This is clearly the hint. The fulfillment was to follow days before His death, and be finally understood only *after* His death.

When the actual moment of His sacrifice came as He had predicted it would, He explained what it meant. He sat down for the Passover meal with His disciples. The food that sustained, the fellowship this provided, the celebration it encompassed and the pleasure of God's provision were enjoyed. Only now, there was a heaviness in their hearts. For that heaviness, manna alone would not help. This was a time to face life's supreme worth. An offering of such worth was in the making. The sacrificial Lamb of God was blessing the meal even as He was to be sacrificed. He took the bread, gave thanks and gave it to His disciples, saying, "Take and eat. This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." He took the cup, gave thanks and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." They tasted, touched, smelt, knew and felt the dimensions of their salvation. He was physically present as He offered the elements.

There you have it. This broken piece of bread represented what was about to happen. He was going to be physically and emotionally battered in a way that would draw the attention of friend and foe alike. In that actual brokenness, a mending would ensue. We ourselves would have the way *provided* to reconnect with God, with our fellow human beings and with ourselves. We would have access to a new relationship, which is part of a larger body, individually and corporately because of His body broken for us. We could be part of an unbreakable *fellowship* because He would come and dwell within us. We could take part in an eternal *celebration* when we would be in the presence of God forever. We could know *pleasure* at His right hand because worship would be its climactic expression. These symbols of His broken body for ours, His binding for our dismemberment—these are given a tangible expression in the elements when we gather together for worship.

Although by remembering Jesus' past teaching the disciples had a partial understanding of what was happening that night, clarity was attained in a significant moment after the resurrection. The day Christ died had been a day they could not understand or appreciate. There was a sombreness to their lives. They had questions galore.

After it all happened, some of the disciples were on a journey and as they walked on the road toward the town of Emmaus, a stranger came alongside them. Much had happened during those few days and they were in deep discussion, trying to understand it all. The stranger, listening in, asked why they were so despondent. They told him of the tragic

happenings in the death of Jesus three days previous and added, "Are you the only one in Israel who does not know what has happened?"

The truth is that He was the only one in Israel who did know what had happened. But they did not yet know who He was. He began to expound all of history and how it tied into that day and its events. They were wonder-struck at the way everything connected. They still did not know who He was and pleaded with him to stay and have the evening meal with them.

As they sat down to eat the defining moment came. **He broke some bread.** And the Bible says that as He did that, their eyes were suddenly opened and they knew it was Jesus Himself. There has not been a simpler act in history with more profound trans-historical memory attached. What a moment! What a meal! What a message! What a transcendence! Indeed, to this very day, the Christian sits down with his or her fellow believers and shares in the broken bread and the cup. In that simple transaction, all of history finds its meaning in the person of Christ. In that act, we remember the Jesus who came, who laid down His life for us, the Jesus who will return. In that act every barrier is broken—the barrier of sin between us and God, the barrier between body and soul before the physical and the spiritual connect, the barrier between life and death, where the hammer of time beats upon the anvil of eternity and borrows eternal significance. The barrier of race and prejudice, for we all stand before Him at the same meal. **It is the Mensef of God.** Can there be a greater reason to celebrate? **Now life can be realised with every moment that it is lived.** That broken bread bridges every humanly unbridgeable chasm in millions of lives. We see in a way nothing else could have imparted—through His eyes, with His presence.

TRANSLATING INTO LIFE/ A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

This sharing of the bread and of the cup has been aptly called **Communion**. God has come near and we enjoy the indwelling of His presence in us. The contrast here from every other faith is as diametric as one can imagine. Hinduism teaches us to seek union with the divine because it claims that we are part and parcel of this divine universe. The goal of the individual is to discover that divinity and live it out. One of India's premier philosophers stated, "Man is God in a temporary state of self-forgetfulness." Is this what a few thousand years of human history has taught us? We are lonely and confused gods who have lost our way? This is the reason the meditative process is enjoined—so that we can as individuals merge with the one impersonal absolute—the capital "I", because there is no significant other.

Union with the impersonal absolute defies language, reason and existential realities. It does not satisfy the longing for communion.

While Hinduism goes to one extreme—the deification of the self—Islam is at the other extreme. In Islam the distance between God and humanity is so vast that the "I" never gets close to the "Him" in God. Repetition and submission take the place of the warmth of a relationship with a broken Saviour who came to call us to worship Him in the simplicity and

sacredness of life. One only need glimpse a Muslim at worship to see the difference.

In the Christian message, the God who is **distinct** and **distant** came **close** so that we who are weak may be made strong and may be drawn close in communion with God Himself, even as our **identity is retained** as we are. That simple act of communion encapsulated life's purpose. The individual retains his individuality while dwelling in community. The physical retains its physicality but is transcended by the spiritual. The elements retain their distinctness but become bearers of truth that point beyond themselves to a fellowship that our spirits long for.

Just as the consummate act of love between man and wife concretely expresses all that the moral and spiritual relationship embraces, so the simple act of Communion encompasses the actual reality of the intermeshing of God's presence in the life of the individual. It is an act of worship that represents a life full of meaning.

In Communion, time is transcended by eternity. Jesus' death in the past is remembered in the present and points to the future when we will break bread with Him in eternity. Every sense is brought into play—touch, taste, scent, hearing, seeing. The inner intuition or imagination is called upon to enter into an experience that can be shared with God because of the broken body of His Son. The breaking of bread—a simple act, with profound ramifications.

This brings us to a most staggering conclusion on **what worship means**. Food and health may be a relevant branch to which we hold. But the trunk that is rooted in the sacred call of God to worship is based on a reversal of that relevance. It is not that God needs to be relevant to us. It is the very counter-perspective of God which beckons us to **become relevant to Him**. What do I mean?

The experience of worship can sometimes call us to **look beyond our need to what God is calling us toward**. How often have we craved light on our life in the world, only to be summoned to ponder our destiny in eternity? How often have we been preoccupied with the church local, and instead found our vision turned to the Church triumphant and universal? And how often have we asked that worship bless our souls with peace, only to hear the lesson for the day calling us to a holy warfare? How often have we desired strength to overcome the world, only to learn that we are to be stoned and sawn asunder in the world? How often have we sought comfort to our sorrows, and instead found the sorrows of the world added to our own? Such reversals may be strange to men. But only such contradiction answers to realities both relevant and irrelevant that are at the heart of the Church's worship.

This was the reversal the disciples did not expect. They came to Jesus asking for the abundance of bread so they could be full, and found out that there was bread of a different kind broken for them because they had a deeper emptiness than they had imagined. They had bought their lunch at a nearby restaurant but they were being invited to a different table. With their purchase, they would soon be hungry again. He was offering them—and us—**eternal fulfillment with moment by moment freshness**. ■