

“Miracles Are Easy”

This past week Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., Sergeant James Crowley, Vice President Joe Biden, and the President of the United States of America Barak Obama, sat down for a beer together. In case you missed this news item, it began this way—Sgt. Crowley was called to Prof. Gates’ home last week following a neighbour’s report of an attempted break-in. Prof. Gates had lost his keys and was trying to enter his own house. Gates was charged with disorderly conduct after he protested that his treatment of the hands of the police was racially motivated. Obama remarked that the police acted stupidly. So they got together, had a beer, and agreed that they should look forward, rather than backward.

But what if they had looked backward? They might have remembered two college students, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, who started the Black Panther Party. Their rallying cry was “Land, Bread, Housing, Education, Clothing, Justice, and Peace!” Did you notice that it was “Land, Bread, Housing, Education, Clothing, Justice, and Peace!” not “Land, Beer, Housing, Education, Clothing, Justice, and Peace!”

Throughout history it has always been about bread. The cries of the people in the Exodus wilderness were for bread. King David in order to consolidate power became the bread maker. If you wanted to eat you gave your grain to the king, who baked it and gave some of it back to you as bread. The provider of bread is the one who has the power. If you want to make peace with someone, you sit down and break bread together. At least that’s how it was in the old days before the White House “Beer Summits.”

During the time of Jesus, in the rabbinic tradition, Moses is associated with manna and Torah, and manna is accepted as an allegorical Torah. In Philo, manna is connected with Logos, wisdom and Torah, and Moses is presented as Logos and Torah incarnate.” Vermes (1969:

262) So when John tells his story of Jesus, it is standard protocol to declare that Jesus is the Logos (the Word of God) and the Bread of Life—eternal life.

Now the multiplication of the loaves of bread, in the conservative Christian tradition, has been interpreted to mean that this is proof that Jesus is the Son of God because only the Son of God could do miracles like that. The liberal tradition has always said that it is about sharing, that is, everybody brought their lunch but only shared when a little child shared first.

I would like to suggest that both these interpretations miss the point. The story simply means that being able to provide food is an ultimate act of power. Remember the old phrase breadwinner? It was a designation of the most powerful person in a family—the one who provided bread. We will come back to power issues, but let’s first look at the sermon title — “miracles are easy.”

One of the modern miracles is the potato.

Back in 1776, Adam Smith wrote in his book “The Wealth of Nations”, that “the food produced by a field of potatoes is not inferior in quantity to that produced by a field of rice, and much superior to what is produced by a field of wheat...an acre of potatoes will still produce six thousand weight of solid nourishment, three times the quantity produced by an acre of wheat.”

Up that that time the potato was simply animal food. In France at the same time a scientist planted potatoes in a garden given to him by the King outside of Paris. With great ingenuity he posted armed guards around the field. This aroused the interest of the locals who wondered what kind of crop would require guards. When the potatoes were ready he took the guards away, the locals rushed in and stole the potatoes. The King said to the scientist, “France will thank you some day for having found bread for the poor.”

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At the beginning of the last century with the advent of chemical fertilizers and selective breeding, food production has been nothing short of miraculous. As recent as 1966 a new variety of rice was developed by crossing a Chinese dwarf variety with an Indonesian strain. At the time, traditional strains of rice produced one ton per hectare. The new variety produced five tons, and ten tons with fertilizer. This scientist received a Noble prize and it was declared that “more than any other single person of this age, he has helped to provide bread for a hungry world.”

Another miracle is transportation. This has been named as a huge contributor to global warming; but a study found that transport accounted for only 11 percent of the energy used in the food chain, compared with 26 percent for processing and 29 percent for cooking.

In the case of potatoes, the emission associated with cooking them far outweigh those involved in growing and transporting them. Whether or not you leave the lid on the pan when boiling your potatoes has more of an impact on the total carbon dioxide emissions, than whether they were grown locally or far away.

A large ship can carry a ton of food 800 miles on a gallon of fuel; the figures are about 200 miles for a train, 60 miles for a truck and 20 miles for a car. So the drive to the grocery store may produce more emissions than the whole of the rest of its journey.

Modern food production is nothing short of a miracle—a miracle that we almost take for granted.

Back to power. Cecil Rhodes, in 1895 reported on a meeting of the unemployed in East London: “I listened to the wild speeches, which were just a cry for “bread,” “bread!” and on my way home I pondered over the scene and I became more than ever, convinced of the importance of imperialism... The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists.”

So Britain’s ruling class forcefully extracted food, resources and wealth from other nations, notably India, in order to blunt hunger at home.

Today, 40 percent of world trade in food, is controlled by transnational agricultural corporations in strategic partnerships with biotech seed and pesticide companies, like Monsanto. These corporations are responsible for, among other things, the proliferation of foods with

high fructose corn syrup (usually made in the U.S.) and soy (often manufactured in Brazil and the U.S.)—a direct result of massive government subsidies and the corporate drive to undercut domestic markets around the globe.

They are aided and abetted by political leaders who accept huge donations from the agribusiness industry. For example, the agribusiness industry gave nearly \$2 million to the Obama campaign.

In Punjab, the epicentre of the country’s high-tech agricultural “Green Revolution,” the United Nations scandalized the government when it announced that, in 1995-56, over a third of farmers faced “ruin and a crisis of existence... This phenomenon started during the second half of the 1980s and gathered momentum during the 1990s.” It has been getting worse. According to the most recent figures, suicide rates in Punjab are soaring...

Not all poor farmers kill themselves in India, of course. Rather than suicide, some farmers have sold their kidneys. In Shingnapur, a village in the Amravati district of the Maharashtra, farmers have gone one step further, setting up a “Kidney Sale Centre.” One farmer simply said, “We...invited the Prime Minister and the President to inaugurate this kidney shop... Our kidneys are all we have left to sell.”

When Jesus offers us bread, his body, it is a free gift. But if you take this bread, you are breaking bread with the poor farmer in India, with oppressed minorities all over the world, with children with distended stomachs suffering from malnutrition, with all whom God loves. To eat bread together is to make a commitment to justice, to care for all God’s family.

So, next time you sit down to have a beer with friends—think about these things.