

The Vintage Voice

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Jesus Is The Bread Man

The Very Reverend Bob Libby

When I was a young lad growing up during the Depression, supermarkets were a rarity and street vendors were everywhere.

The fish monger came by on Friday. You could smell the flounders and clams as soon as his truck turned the corner. He was usually followed by the greengrocer. We never saw the milk man, but we were often awakened by the sound of bottles rattling at the back door. You could special order other dairy products, but Mother preferred the butter and egg man, Uncle Joe, who was related in some way to my grandmother's second cousin. The organ grinder cranked his music box, while his monkey on a long tether took up a collection in a tin cup. Some said that the monkey had also been trained to pick pockets, but that was never proved. The Fuller Brush Man didn't have a vehicle either, but went from door to door with a large suitcase filled with his wares. Those were Depression days, and Mother always purchased several packages of shoelaces at five cents each, "to help the man out." Eventually she bought a lifetime supply, for when she died, I found a whole shoebox full of them. Our favorite in the summer was, of course, the Good Humor Man. He glided down our street, ringing his bell and gathering a following that would have put the Pied Piper to shame.

But the all-season favorite was the Bread Man. You could pick up the hot, yeasty aroma blocks away. Everything he had to offer was fresh and steamy. You could buy loaves of bread whole or watch his magical slicer do its work. On weekends he had all kinds of coffee cake, and on Good Friday, his specialty was hot cross buns.

When I think of Jesus, born in Bethlehem (which is Hebrew for "house of bread"), and his ministry around the Sea of Galilee, I can't help wondering if he wasn't known by most of the locals as "The Bread Man."

Ten lepers remembered what he did for them, and the woman from Capernaum, with the issue of blood, had her story to tell. The widow of Nain never stopped sharing her account of her son's close encounter with death. The commander of the Roman Legion had a similar story. Jesus' twelve friends had their own memories of the stories he told and the people he helped or healed.

A large number recalled his sermon on the side of the mountain, and considered him a rabbi. But more than any other one event, thousands remembered him as the Bread Man. Scholars tell us that at the very most, there were no more than one hundred thousand people living in Galilee. But the four evangelists all record the feeding of the five thousand — and that didn't include women and children. Would that bring the figure up to twenty thousand, or would it be closer

to twenty-five thousand? And then there was a second seating some time later for four thousand. All of which means that perhaps more than twenty-five percent of the population of Galilee could have remembered him as the Bread Man.

Then he left the region. Rumor had it that he had gone to Jerusalem. At first they welcomed him as a hero. Some even wanted to make him their king. That was the first report delivered by the camel drivers en route to Damascus. But the second report was grim. He had been arrested, tried in a midnight court on trumped up charges, and then turned over to the Roman Governor for execution. The night before all this happened, on the eve of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, he said a strange thing: he told them that the bread was his body and that they should break it whenever they gathered in remembrance of him.

What a pity! He was such a nice man! Why did they have to put the Bread Man to death? And then they went back to their farming and fishing. More than a week went by before the next caravan came through with the rumor that the Bread Man wasn't dead, but alive. He had appeared to his friends many times, and there was even a report that two men met him on the Emmaus Road and that they recognized him when he broke bread with them!

The fishermen who had followed the Bread Man came back to the Galilee, untangled their nets and went back to their trade. But not for long. Early one morning, the Bread Man met them on the shore and fixed them breakfast. He confronted their leader with the question, "Do you love me?" and when Simon Peter responded in the affirmative, the Bread Man told him to go and "feed my sheep!"

As my life has now passed the Biblical ration of "three score years and ten," I find myself simplifying things. In so doing, the concept that "Jesus was the Bread Man" has proved to be very helpful. John reminds me in the sixth chapter of his Gospel that Jesus is the bread of life and that I am to feed on him in word and sacrament. Matthew 25 takes me in another direction and assures me that in reaching out to those in need, I am encountering him. "I was hungry and you fed me . . ."

This may be a bit simple, but it is enough for now.

Jesus is the Bread Man!



The Very Reverend Bob Libby is the interim dean of Trinity Cathedral, Miami, Florida, having returned to full-time employment after retirement in 1998. His retirement years included traveling to art shows with his wife, Lynne, a professional artist, conducting workshops, writing, preaching for Food For The Poor, and serving as a chaplain on cruise ships, including the QE2. The Libbys continue to live on Key Biscayne, where they enjoy walking on the beach and entertaining family and friends — who especially like to visit during the winter months.