

# TFTD L23 Bread in the wilderness

Weds April 6<sup>th</sup>

This week's theme for *Thought for the Day* is the breaking of bread:



*Mark 6.35-44. Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. He gave them to his disciples to serve the people, and he divided the two fish amongst them all. They all ate and were satisfied; and they picked up the broken pieces that were left over, twelve baskets full.*

I'm sure, like me, you were delighted last month at the news story of the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe — one bit of good news amidst all the tragedies. Last Christmas Nazanin's husband Richard posted this blog about the way cooking helped Nazanin and the other women in prison keep their hopes and humanity alive. Baking bread (and cakes) was a way of breaking down isolation, learning to trust and share. A way of connecting with the outside world — especially those most precious to us. A way of reaching out for normality in a world where nothing is normal. Here's how it works:

“Nazanin has been cooking, a legacy of prison. In Evin, food is about mental health as much as physical. Sometimes more so. Most arrive from solitary with their appetite withdrawn. When Nazanin first came out, all she ate was cheese puffs. It took her time to trust and share.

“Her isolation was broken down through food. Sometimes so much depends upon a warm meal table, or two cups of tea.

“In the public ward, they took cooking seriously. It revived an appetite for life. For a world of bare cupboards, the women spent considerable efforts planning meals, with elaborate schemes, even battles for certain ingredients or fresh fruit or vegetables brought by the prison shop.

“Mealtimes helped absorb uncertainty. Their routines broke up the day, with projects that filled time and feelings. Busy fingers quietened busy minds. Ordinary life goes on in extreme circumstances, precisely because normality is needed.

“Food also helped them hold onto the world outside. Last year Nazanin was sent coffee by a politician who visited our #hungry4justice tent. The women shared it in treasured sips in the yard, remembering other coffees in the sun, savouring stories from faraway lives. It helped remind them: they are in prison, not of the prison.

“They nourish this sense through cooking. The women continually invite each other to mark the occasions passing outside, like the Bahai bicentennial or the Islamic Eid. Celebrations always centred on a long meal table, with lunch and laughter spread.

“Food had other ways of reaching across walls. On visiting days, the women prisoners made edible treats for their families. Hospitality is always a marker of home. For Nazanin, making breads and biscuits for her little girl allowed her to be briefly mum again. Gabriella would sit on Nazanin’s lap, resting her head on Nazanin’s chest as she ate.

“For absent children prisoners would bake birthday cakes and celebrate vicariously, especially when no phone-call was allowed. Other prisoners send food home to absent relatives, even overseas.”

In the Bible story of the Exodus, the refugees crossing the desert were obsessed with food. They kept remembering the wonderful tasty vegetables they could grow in Egypt: cucumbers, onions and leeks. Yet on the long trek across the desert, God kept their faith and hope alive by providing what they actually needed — bread in the wilderness.

In the Gospel story of the loaves and fishes, Jesus and his disciples were stranded in the ‘wilderness’ — out in a deserted spot, with 5000 hungry families to feed, no shops in sight, and just a little boy’s picnic to share. Jesus took the bread, broke it, said the prayer of thanksgiving and blessing, and started to share it out. And — much to the disciples’ surprise — everybody had enough and to spare.

Taking bread, breaking it, saying a prayer of thanksgiving and blessing, and sharing it out — that's at the heart of our Communion service. I've shared that service in a grand cathedral, in parish churches week by week, at the seaside, beside a hospital bed — 'always and everywhere', as the old Prayer Book says. And 'always and everywhere,' that simple action of breaking bread connects us with each other, supplies the nourishment we need to survive whatever prison or wilderness we're in — and connects us with God. Incredibly simple — and inexhaustibly profound. Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

God bless,  
Loveday