

life lines “Have you eaten yet?”

By Ian Robinson, Major

When Chinese Singaporeans of an older generation greet each other they don't say, “Hi!” “How's it going?” or “Wassup?” They say, “Have you eaten yet?” With typical Singapore linguistic frugality, they often reduce the question to a single Malay word, “Makan?” which simply means, “Eat?”

It all stems from Singapore's early days, before they were established as a nation, and probably originated in China. Most people were poor and food was scarce, so if you met a friend in the street you would ask him if he had eaten yet. If he answered no, it was usually because he could not afford to buy food, so you would invite him back to your house to share what little you had. On another occasion they might reciprocate the gesture and in this way everyone shared their food with everyone else. Of course, nowadays it has become a rhetorical question, more of a greeting than a genuine inquiry into one's welfare.

Food in Singapore is a national obsession. Everyone eats all the time. Every housing block has a food court with 20 or more stalls serving delicious Chinese, Malay, Indian and even Thai or Indonesian food. Many food courts are open 24 hours, and outside of the housing blocks these eateries are sometimes known as hawker centers. All major hotels have an international buffet and the streets beside the Singapore River are lined with restaurants. Eating out is so relatively inexpensive that it doesn't make sense to cook at home. Just go down to the food court and enjoy a big plate of steaming hot noodles with seafood and a rich gravy for a couple of bucks.

This is making me hungry!

A good friend of mine, Jimi Tan, is the chaplain at The Salvation Army's Peacehaven Nursing Home. Recently, he told me about Moy Ga Ho, a resident of the home who accepted Jesus as her personal Savior in Peacehaven. She took ill and was admitted to the hospital. When Jimi went to visit her she said, “Jimi, no one visited me except you. I was hungry and not able to eat because of my physical condition then I remembered you told me about the name of Jesus. So I called to him to help me and when lunch came I was able to eat and get my strength back!” And, despite the social workers making



her funeral arrangements, she was happily back in Peacehaven within a week.

“Have you eaten?” must have been an important question in Jesus’ day as well since he fed 5,000 hungry people using only five loaves and two fish. Jesus understood the importance of meeting their physical hunger before he preached to them. William Booth had the same idea. Later on, Jesus told his disciples, “*Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you*” (John 6:27).

If physical food is essential to our daily survival, spiritual food is just as essential to our spiritual survival. Like my granddaughter, I can only go a few hours before I get “hangry”—a hunger that makes me growl and snap at people. So, it is surely not possible to go for hours, or days, or even weeks, without satisfying our spiritual hunger. We must learn to feed our souls on God’s Word with great and increasing regularity or we will die.

In his commentary on John 6:27, Albert Barnes calls this, “The supply of your spiritual wants; that which supports, and nourishes, and strengthens the soul; the doctrines of the gospel, that are to a weak and guilty soul what needful food is to the weary and decaying body.”

Isn’t it time for us to put as much, if not more, effort into satisfying our spiritual hunger as we do in making sure our physical and emotional needs are adequately met? Have you eaten yet?