

17th Sunday B

John 6:1-15

The story which has become known as the feeding of the five thousand falls into that rare category of material which can be found in all four gospels. As you know, the fourth gospel, John, is markedly different in its content from the other three. It lacks parables, for example, and you won't find familiar narratives such as that of the Transfiguration, or Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ. The reason for such omissions is disputed, because scholars differ greatly as to which, if any, of the other three gospels the author of John already knew. However, none of the gospel authors is simply aping the others, and their individual use and presentation of common material tells us a lot about particular concerns.

John tacks the story of the feeding miracle on to a long discussion which the other gospels lack – it is sometimes called the “bread of life” discourse. It contains some of the most explicit Eucharistic theology in the New Testament – ‘unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you have no life in you’. This is especially noteworthy because John's is the only one of the four gospels to lack what we call an institution narrative – there is no account of Jesus taking bread and wine at the last supper and saying the words which form our prayer of consecration, ‘This is my body’, etc. Nevertheless, in the argument which comes a day after the miracle of the loaves, we find an unequivocal statement of the necessity of eating and drinking the body and blood of the Son of Man.

Is John just trying to draw our attention to the fact that the feeding miracle is strongly symbolic of the Eucharistic action? I don't think so. He is aware of that symbolism, but so are the other evangelists, and they are happy to let the story speak for itself. The action of taking bread, raising his eyes to heaven to give thanks and distributing it so that all have enough to eat, seems clear enough. So also do the twelve baskets full which remain, gathered up so that nothing be lost, like the remnant of Israel whose twelve tribes those twelve baskets represent.

In the fourth gospel, it seems to be the response to the miracle which is all important. First of all, note the people's words: When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said "This is indeed the prophet who was to come into the world". That phrase "the prophet" is worth a little attention. Anyone familiar with the questions to John the Baptist in the gospel's opening chapter, famously set in Gibbons marvellous anthem "This is the record of John", will have heard the question "Are you the prophet". This un-named prophet is a product of scriptural commentary and speculation among Jewish thinkers, who noticed that the book of Deuteronomy tells us that "there has not since arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses who knew the Lord face to face". Some were perhaps expecting such a prophet to return only when the Lord's decisive act brought about the redemption of his people.

For the fourth evangelist, Jesus is this prophet, and he isn't. He is like Moses, but as Matthew also insists, he is greater than Moses. Thus it is, perhaps, that the people wish to make him king. But that is not the sort of greatness which is meant, and so he withdraws and stays away. His next appearance is even more telling, for now John gives us the story of walking on the water, and remember, in the Old Testament it is only the Lord, together with the personification of wisdom, who walks on the water.

If the people wish to make Jesus king, the authorities have quite the opposite intention. They are disputing his authority as much as they can: what sign do you do, they say, in order that we may believe in you? Their obtuseness is there for all to see, for the sign was plain enough. But it is their choice of scriptural story which is telling – our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness. What do you do? Jesus now has to correct them, because it was not Moses who gave the manna, but my Father, who not only gave in the past but gives in the present the true bread from heaven. Already Jesus has taunted them – you seek me because you ate your fill of the loaves, not because you saw signs.

This passage in the gospel constitutes a lengthy interpretation of this morning's gospel, a story we find told several times, the story of those loaves and fish. How are we to interpret that interpretation? Chiefly, I think, by concentrating on bringing together

symbol and reality, which is after all what this eucharist is about. Jesus has, literally, fed the people. They were hungry and now they are satisfied. Their material need has been met, they have that which they need to live. He has also, however, done this symbolically, by anticipating in this action his own self-giving which will feed and nourish his people for eternal life, the risen life which is lived in the Spirit. In so doing he has recalled Elisha, of whose feeding we heard earlier, and also set himself above Moses, calling himself the Son of the one who has truly done all this feeding – long ago and at this present time.

Those on the receiving end present a variety of mistaken responses: first, to make him king. Wrong. Second: to dispute that the sign actually took place. The authorities whom Jesus sends up are those who were more interested in filling their bellies than noticing what is happening among them. Third, and later, to misunderstand that the food of which Jesus speaks is no different from the person to whom they are speaking. We however have no such excuse. We are here to be nourished by Christ knowing what he has done, what he is doing, and what he will do. How do we respond to our own miraculous feeding? Whatever the answer to that question is, it cannot be to ignore it. The service which we celebrate Sunday by Sunday, day by day, is a service which explicitly enacts the impossibility of compartmentalising our worship, our feeding on Christ, into one small part of our lives. Christ is the bread of life – not the chocolate cake of life, and not the bread of Bank Holidays. This is basic stuff for every day. But every day, every feeding, is a miracle because every day we are living the life which only Christ can provide, and only Christ can nourish.

Christian life is not just spiritual, if by that we mean immaterial. The material in itself is simply material, but material things given life – material things like you and me - are the reality which the presence of God brings about. We take the eucharist with us into every single thing that we say and we do. The presence of Christ can never be left behind. That is truly a miraculous thing, and it is also a slightly scary thought. Hold on to it.