

## PENTECOST X Proper 13 August 1, 2021 St. Alban's Staten Island

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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In today's gospel lesson, the scene shifts to Capernaum on the other side of the lake. Once the crowds become aware that Jesus has left, they too leave for Capernaum. The mysterious departure of Jesus raises the question: "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus does not answer directly but rather questions their motives. He suggests that they are looking for him because "they were filled by the feeding rather than because they saw signs." This response can help us see what role the signs play in John's gospel. Jesus makes a distinction between the miraculous side of the appearance of adequate food for the crowd and the spiritual side (that is, the feeding pointing to his real identity). Although it can appear contradictory to recognize that the crowd *did* identify him but did so in a faulty way, seeing him as a prophet-king, what this likely represents is John's own view that such a perception was "fundamentally a self-centered and spiritually deficient understanding" and is thus not a basic contradiction in the text.

Jesus asks the crowd to work for food that leads to eternal life, but they misunderstand and instead ask how *they themselves* might accomplish this. They seem to have understood Jesus to be saying that they also could produce the kind of *imperishable* food Jesus refers to, in part because they have seized on the verb *to work*. Jesus does not contradict them but rather goes on to say that this food will be given to them by the *Son of Man*, the term he used to refer to himself at that time – a term with no fixed definition but rather one open to a number of interpretations. The "one work necessary is to believe in him who is sent by God." So, the crowd ask for a second sign, citing the miracle of the manna from Exodus 16 which would suggest that Moses in this way gave a sign. This shows that they want more perishable food, not the imperishable kind Jesus is speaking of. Jesus will show them that God gives "superior bread from heaven," the kind that brings life, but this only causes them to call out for this kind of bread.

They simply do not fully comprehend the teaching of Jesus, so Jesus goes on in later verses to clarify what this 'bread from heaven' is: "I am the bread of life." In other words, he himself has come from heaven "to give life to those who believe." In doing so, he attempts to dispel "spiritual hunger" and "spiritual thirst." He does this because he recalls that only moments before they were calling to make him a king and by this they meant "a king like other kings, a strong this-worldly figure who would lead them in their strong this-worldly agenda." But he has in mind a very different kind of king. What he is preaching is now clear: "those who believe in Jesus as the bread of life will have eternal life, and Jesus will raise them up on the last day." But Jesus appears to go on to expand upon the theme of hunger and spiritual food by anticipating eucharistic language, that of the Lord's Supper which is yet to occur, but the question of "who Jesus really is NOW comes to the fore and will steadily dominate the discussion."

In any discussion of John's account, it is important to remember that the Fourth Gospel was "formed in a context of conflict with a local synagogue." The very identity of the community for whom the gospel was written grew out of that conflict and was forged in rejection by fellow Jews. You may recall that the

group for whom this gospel was written had taken a very high *christological* position, maintaining that Jesus was fully God (as well as fully human.) More traditional Jews were appalled at the notion that God could take human form.

But what is important here is that in response to their rejection by their fellow Jews, the followers of Jesus in John's community drew legitimacy for their position in response to this challenge. What we see in today's gospel lesson on the discourse of Jesus on "manna from heaven" vs. the superior bread he was offering is a delineation of that position. This passage is "essentially *exegesis* of the Jewish Scriptures." Or critical interpretation of a sacred text. The key passage is "he gave them bread from heaven to eat." In good rabbinic fashion, the argument goes something like this: "do not read 'he (Moses) gave,' but rather 'he (God) gives.' The point is a simple one, but it illustrates a profound difference in emphasis. The whole discussion between Jesus and the crowds "is then to be regarded as following the typical course of such exegetical discussions" and follows "the pattern of a synagogue homily," in this case as clarification of two passages: one from Exodus and the other from Isaiah: Then the Lord said to Moses, "*I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not*" AND ("Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. *Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.* I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.")

The discourse, then, is essentially an attempt to demonstrate the truthfulness of the statement made at the end of John 5: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. <sup>40</sup>Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. <sup>41</sup>I do not accept glory from human beings. <sup>42</sup>But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. <sup>43</sup>I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. <sup>44</sup>How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? <sup>45</sup>Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. <sup>46</sup>If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. <sup>47</sup>But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?"

What is at issue throughout the discourse is the question of belief in Jesus. In the Fourth Gospel, to be part of the people of God or even to seek to observe the Law is without value if one refuses to accept God's messenger.

In the passage read for today, Jesus identifies himself as the bread from heaven. This saying is a revelation of the significance of Jesus for salvation in metaphorical language, as are all of the "I am" sayings. Jesus is the true embodiment of God's Wisdom, and the source of true spiritual nourishment which gives

eternal life. Jesus rebukes the Jews by saying that if they had known the Father, whom they claim as their God, they would have known and accepted Jesus. In this view, the Jews reject Jesus because they have rejected their own God. And in all of these instances, recall that these references to the Jews refer specifically only to those in the particular, local synagogue who had rejected the community of John --- - certainly not *all* Jews.

The author of this gospel draws a specific parallel between the grumbling of the Israelites under the leadership of Moses in the wilderness and the contemporaries of Jesus. The heart of the problem is that Jesus' audience know that Jesus is a human being, apparently like other human beings, and his family is known to them, and these facts make his claim to a heavenly origin seem ludicrous. Whereas Moses rebuked the Israelites by saying that they were not grumbling against him but against the Lord, the point being made in chapter 6 is that to complain against God's servant or appointed messenger is to grumble against God.

The scene revealed in today's gospel lesson is cloaked in miscomprehension and the problem of limited vision for those only recently exposed to Jesus in his public ministry. "The people that witnessed the feeding become the eyes through which we too shall see the revelation. Their eyes, like ours, are dull for they are caught up in *what they see and experience*." Only the disciples have seen and heard in the "I AM" (statements) how Jesus has moved to the new setting (in the town of Capernaum) with a new perspective. Here another aspect of the misunderstanding of the feeding becomes clear when Jesus says that their reason for seeking him is that they saw in him one who provided bread so that they could eat their fill. In this, Jesus was able to discern that "the sign of the feeding went 'unseen'."

From here we find the author of John attempting to account for this lack of sight, this lack of full comprehension. Part of the answer resides in the fact that "the difficulty for (the crowd) and for us is found in the reality that God is present in the bread. What they saw, tasted, and swallowed was what their previous experience prepared them to receive --- bread." And, in fact, it was pretty poor bread at that, made of "barley, the poorest of grains." Was it any wonder, then, that God couldn't be seen in such a sign? The fact is that "*God is present in the common*." We all have difficulty with that, so it does not behoove us to fault the first century crowds witnessing the work of Jesus. But, in the end, it is not our own work that brings us to believe. It is the work of God to give us this kind of sight. In the words of the text, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom (God) has sent." When they still yet do not understand, Jesus moves on to the story of the manna in the wilderness as the only way to get through to them. But we are left with the issue unresolved. And perhaps that is just as it should be because the issue has never been fully answered or clarified to what we know would have been the standard expected by Jesus. Instead, we are simply left with the focus of the words "this is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent." Not our work. The work of God. And I think that is an appropriate point at which to leave today's account --- unresolved but potentially answerable if we open our hearts to the Spirit of God.

In the beautiful words of the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm,

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.

You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

AMEN

Sources:

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