

PENTECOST XII Proper 15 August 15, 2021 St. Alban's Staten Island

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

Because today's gospel reading can seem repetitive, I'd like to concentrate our attention on an aspect of the lesson which goes beyond the thrust of a single selection of verses from chapter 6 of what we refer to as the Fourth Gospel. Otherwise, I'm afraid we will all lose sight of some of the underlying issues which go a long way in helping us understand the text.

My point is that it is really helpful to recall that this gospel was written for a specific community of Jesus-followers toward the end of the first century. It was a group of committed disciples of Jesus who had a singular focus in their view of the Master. It was a view which alienated more traditional Jews to the point that they ejected the other group from the local synagogue. This had a significant effect on this group. But in addition to producing anger and resentment and alienation, this splintering of the Jesus community helped to solidify the message of the community for whom this gospel was written, and this produced a sense of legitimacy which protected them from feeling they had somehow betrayed the Son of God; it lifted their spirits and enhanced their determination.

If we bear this in mind, much of the language of the discourse on "Bread of Life" or "Bread from Heaven" in chapter 6 of the gospel according to St. John comes into sharper focus. In other words, if we can recall that *the whole thrust of the passage derives from this struggle and the growing need for John's community to feel good about its side of the debate*, it can help us unravel what can seem like just an endless stream of very similar verses whose repetition simply deadens the impact these words might otherwise have.

The reason we think this discourse helped legitimize the beliefs and practices of the Johannine community (that is, the community for whom this gospel was written --- John's community) is that there are signs here of "motifs which were important to the Johannine Christians in their debates and conflicts with the synagogue" group: (1) the idea that Jesus fulfilled the expectations for the Messiah which arose out of Jewish tradition over many centuries; (2) the heavenly origin of Jesus; (3) his ascension and the extent to which this legitimized his claims; and (4), his relationship to Moses and the Torah which were considered vital to his identity as the true Messiah. We see all of these elements in the passages we've been examining in John's sixth chapter of his gospel which contain the so-called discourse on *Bread of Life* or *Bread from Heaven*.

Jesus is here identified as the true manna from heaven. This concept is used to show that "Jesus fulfilled the Jewish expectation of an eschatological provision of manna... and the need to contrast Jesus with Moses and the Torah." (And, simply to remind, that notoriously difficult word *eschatological* simply means relating to death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind.) This is a Christological exposition of the Old Testament manna tradition, that is, the role of Jesus in the whole of the Jewish tradition as now experienced through the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth ---- the imposition of the newer Jesus tradition on the foundational aspects of the Old Testament and its role

in defining belief. This enabled faith in Jesus “to be expounded in a way that (was) relevant to the Johannine community’s legitimation of its beliefs and practices in the context of its conflict with the synagogue.”

For these Jesus-followers, the ascent of Jesus into heaven “simply confirmed that Jesus was in fact the pre-existent Son of Man and the incarnation of God’s Word” (as these ideas were developed in the Prologue to John’s gospel). When we bear this in mind, it can help us understand how “the distinctive elements in Johannine Christology (the belief in Christ’s divinity) were formed in the furnace of the community’s conflict with the synagogue.”

Bishop John Shelby Spong, formerly of the Diocese of Newark, has been a divisive figure in the Episcopal church, because he has been seen as a critic of some of the church’s orthodox teachings. However, he has also been one of the foremost scholars speaking to believers in the 21st century. His books are provocative, of course, but in my view they simply buttress faith; they do not undermine it if we take seriously what Spong has said about what the Bible really tells us about the identity and message of Jesus of Nazareth.

In one of his more provocative works, The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic, Spong reminds us in his remarks on the *Feeding of the 5,000* and *Jesus Walking on Water* that “in the time John wrote (his gospel), Jesus’ disciples had been cast out of the synagogue...so John was saying to them that Jesus must be to them both a new Moses and a new doorway into the meaning of God.” In the miracle story, Spong argues, we have a classic Moses story and a key part of the Exodus narrative.

This is because the two most dramatic Moses stories (provide narratives about) “the power seen in the feeding of the hungry multitude in the wilderness with heavenly bread called manna.” The incident in which Jesus walks on water can also be seen as an allusion to the Crossing of the Red Sea in the Exodus narrative. Thus, “Jesus is now revealed to possess the power that the God of Moses possessed.” John also makes the claim that “Jesus himself is ‘the bread of life’ which satisfies the deepest hunger in the human soul.” Whenever I find that I am overwhelmed by the length and repetition of this chapter in John’s gospel as it is revealed in one Sunday after another of brief passages all pointing in the same direction, I need to be reminded that this is what it is all about: Jesus is pointing us in the direction of a whole new way of viewing God’s relationship with his people, one which can satisfy this very deep hunger of ours which is undeniable. And in relation to how this chapter informs our view of the Eucharist itself, John is saying “to his readers that they must take Jesus’ life into their life. Eating Jesus’ flesh is the way he chooses to communicate that.” I don’t know about you, but for me this is a very helpful way of hearing and interpreting those puzzling elements of the mass in which Jesus tells us to eat his flesh and drink his blood. This is the way Jesus chose to communicate the deeply meaningful ideas we hear expressed every Sunday of our lives. This is what is meant by deeming Christ our *Emmanuel* (or *Immanuel*), “God with us.” A kind of shorthand way of expressing one of the ideas which is central to our faith.

Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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