

The Bread of Life

On July 29, our readings from the Gospel of Mark in this liturgical cycle were interrupted by the beginning of the Sixth Chapter of John's Gospel, which continues as our Gospel source for the whole of August. Over these five Sundays, we hear John present his Eucharistic theology through a miracle and a long talk by Jesus. To help us better appreciate these five pericopes, our series of presentations on the Call to Holiness is also interrupted, to consider some thoughts on these Gospel passages.

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time The Gospel reading (Jn 6:1-15) is the narrative of the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes, the same miracle that we would have heard in the next passage of Mark's Gospel. But John adds some elements to more strongly connect the event to Passover and a prophetic miracle, enhancing the Eucharistic theme. John notes that the Feast of Passover was near (6:4), and that there was a great deal of grass in the place, a sign of springtime (6:10). The bread consists of barley loaves (6:9), likely alluding to the miracle of the prophet Elisha (2Kg 4:42-44), in which the prophet fed 100 with 20 barley loaves and had some left over. Jesus feeds 500 with five loaves, and 12 baskets of fragments are left over. The people saw this as a sign and acclaimed Jesus to be the promised Prophet (6:14). Mark's Gospel presents the same miracle without John's allusions and without a reaction from those who were fed.

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time This Sunday's Gospel (Jn 6:24-35) transitions from the bread that the crowd had eaten to "food that endures for eternal life" (6:27). When the people ask what they must do, Jesus tells them to believe in the one God sent (6:29). When they ask for a sign, recalling that Moses fed the people in the desert, Jesus reminds them that it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven, but God (6:32). "The bread of heaven ... gives life to the world" (6:33), he says, leading them beyond physical food to spiritual. When they ask for this bread, Jesus replies with the climactic declaration, "I am the bread of life; whoever believes in me will never hunger" (6:35).

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time This week's Gospel (Jn 6:41-51) features Jesus' reaction to the crowd's initial resistance to what he had said, as they murmur about his family and where he came from. Rather than rebut their points, John has Jesus expand his declaration, explicitly adding the promise of resurrection: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day" (6:44). He adds this challenge for those who claim to follow God's word: "Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me" (6:45). Restating that he himself is the bread of life, Jesus reaches a new climax and an explicitly Eucharistic theme by declaring, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world" (6:51).

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time The final verse of the previous Sunday's Gospel, repeated at this week's opening, is the focal point for the whole excerpt (Jn 6:51-58). The crowd's murmuring about Jesus' family origins becomes a quarrel over how he could give his flesh to eat. Again, John does not have Jesus reply to their objections, but rather he prescribes what becomes the ritual Eucharistic practice of the faith community: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day" (6:53-54).

John makes clear to the Gospel reader that the communion practice of the believers is precisely what Jesus wanted them to do, and that it is more than a remembrance of Jesus' actions – it unites the believer with Jesus and is a means to eternal life through him. John's Last Supper account doesn't even mention Jesus giving the bread and wine as his body and blood. John had already presented Eucharistic theology and directives in this narrative, and he uses the Last Supper as the setting for an example of service, long farewell discourses, the promise of the Spirit, and Christ's prayer for his disciples.

Jesus recaps the lesson in the final verses: "My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him" (6:55-56); "the one who feeds on me will have life because of me" (6:57); and, "this is the bread that came down from heaven ... whoever eats this bread will live forever" (6:58).

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time In this concluding passage (Jn 6:60-69), John presents the reaction, not of the crowd, but rather of Jesus' own disciples to this Bread of Life discourse. They find it hard to accept, possibly a reflection of the difficulty some in the Johannine community still had with this teaching. What troubled them seems to have been the Christology presented, that is, the relationship of Jesus to God, not the Eucharistic theology. Jesus' reply – "What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?" (6:62) – does not address Eucharistic concerns, but the concept that he is the bread of life come down from heaven. He adds, "It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail" (6:63). Here the spirit-flesh contrast is between the supernatural and the material, as it was earlier in Jn 3:6, and not a reference to his flesh that must be eaten in the Eucharist. Jesus states clearly, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (6:63). But he recognizes that not all can accept this – "no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father" (6:65)

The result was that many of the disciples went back to their former way of life. When Jesus asks the Twelve if they, too, want to leave, Peter replies for the group, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God" (6:68-69). This is the confession of faith that John expects from all who belong to the Christian community, not only then but for ages to come, to our own time and beyond.