

18th Sunday of Ordinary Time

John 6:24-35

These central, summer Sundays of the church's year feature a series of gospel readings from John chapter six, among the most important passages in scripture. We are shown Jesus feeding the five thousand but, unlike the synoptic gospels, John follows this with an extended discourse – a sermon almost – on the theme of the God who saves and sustains his people. The fourth gospel's representation of the new Passover is central to this theme. The feeding miracle takes place around the time of the Passover, just as does the first of Jesus' signs, the changing of water into wine. And the bread of life discourse as it is known, comes to us as a dialogue, with Jesus responding to questions thrown at him by onlookers, and it is highly significant. Anyone familiar with the rituals of the Jewish Passover meal will know that at that meal the story of Israel's redemption is told not only by the symbolic eating and drinking, but by a

narrative provoked by certain questions asked by the youngest child – why is this night different from all other nights.

The Christian Passover to which the fourth gospel directs its story is the death and resurrection of Jesus. The multiplication of the loaves and the miraculous draught of new wine at Cana prepare the way for that final and decisive Passover at which Jesus becomes the lamb. What we have here is the foundational memory of the people of God. What happened to Israel in the past is enacted in the Passover meal in order to bring to remembrance – to make present – the same redemptive action of God which continues to guide and nourish his people. The miracle of the manna from heaven comes in the Book of Exodus after the story of the Passover – God delivers his people from slavery and then feeds them with bread from heaven. In the Fourth Gospel this narrative appears to be reversed, but only because the ministry of Jesus to the crowds is quite deliberately drawn to represent the presence of Jesus in the community of the church. The narrative of the gospel is

the narrative of the church. God feeds the people in the present, and the God who feeds is the God who redeems by the Christian Passover of Jesus life, death and resurrection.

Famously lacking from John's gospel are what we have come to call the words of institution, the point at the last supper where Jesus took first bread, then wine, and called them his body and his blood. For nearly two thousand years, Christians have wondered why the evangelist John didn't choose to include this central gospel tradition, which must have been one of the best known of all the stories the Christians preserved about Jesus, and - being the only incident in Jesus life which Paul also describes in detail - is among the best attested historical events described in the New Testament.

The answer to the problem must be contained in the gospel passage we heard this morning. The fourth gospel doesn't need the description of the last supper because it is the only gospel to contain the words "I am

the bread of life”, and this “bread of life” is one of that gospel’s particular gifts to the church’s understanding of Christ: Jesus, the one who reveals God, is the one who gives himself for the life of the world – in the past, by the events of the cross and resurrection, in the present, by the sacraments of grace which gives us our Christian identity.

Our reading this week does not quite dovetail with last Sunday’s gospel – we heard and left the story of the feeding miracle, but the evangelist follows it up with his account of Jesus walking on the sea. As we rejoin chapter six, Jesus is speaking to the crowd which has crossed the sea of Galilee to catch up with him, hanging on his every word. They are puzzled as to his whereabouts, because unlike the disciples they did not see him walk across the lake. His conversation with them is very much a Passover dialogue, a series of questions. They challenge him “what sign do you perform”. Perhaps it should be “what sign do **you** perform, that we might believe in you - our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness”. This miracle - the feeding

of the children of Israel as they wandered in the desert - they seem to be ascribing to Moses, and Jesus has to correct them. It wasn't Moses who gave you the bread from heaven - my father gives you the true bread from heaven. The shift in tense is important here - the people are referring to the past, and Jesus moves the verb to the present: that is, what God did then is what God is doing now.

So first, we have the emphasis on the giver: it wasn't Moses, it was God. Now the emphasis changes to the gift. That gift is the bread of God, as was the manna. And the manna, remember, was a matter of life and death. In our first reading we heard the doubting Israelites taunt Moses saying they would rather have died in Egypt with full stomachs than be brought out into the wilderness to starve. But God is the source of all life. He gives life, and he sustains it. Jesus says that the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. This, of course, is what they want - give us this bread always. Notice here that the giver has changed. First of all they thought of Moses as

the giver of the manna, and Jesus corrected them. Now they ask him to be the giver of the bread of God, and he doesn't correct them.

Far from it. He himself is not only the giver, he is also the gift. He is the bread of life. Again notice the slight shift: Jesus spoke of the bread of God, which gives life: the people asked to receive this bread, and his response is "I am the bread of life". He is, in other words, that which creates and sustains, that which gives true life, eternal life, the life which lives without and beyond death. This tiny little conversation thus opens up to us the message of the entire gospel of John. Only God gives life: Jesus himself is the life which God gives, and he gives what the Father has commanded him to give, his flesh for the life of the world. Remember the prologue, the very first chapter of the gospel, the familiar passage which begins "In the beginning was the word": that prologue contains the words "The law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Grace, truth, light and life. These are the gifts of God. And in the person of Jesus Christ, giver and gift are one.