

Trinity 8 2021 (Proper 12 Yr B) Havant

“Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks he distributed them to the people.”

Does that action, and do even the words themselves, remind you of anything?

At first glance what might seem a miracle of compassion for a hungry crowd, accompanied by a fairly standard blessing of food turns out as so often in St John to be a pointer to something else. He took bread, gave thanks and gave it to them. The similarity of this morning’s account of the feeding of the five thousand and what we do Sunday by Sunday as we gather round the altar is not accidental.

We have just heard the beginning of the great chapter 6 of St John’s gospel; we’ll hear the rest of the chapter the next four Sundays. We shall hear Jesus’ careful and shocking description of himself as the “bread of life”, which people must eat if they are to attain eternal life. If you would like a bit of homework, both to remind you of this morning and prepare you for what lies ahead, may I suggest you spend some time this week reading and praying your way through the whole of John 6.

This morning I shall try to set the scene. Hold tight, because this will be quite a roller coaster.

Notice how precise St John is about where and when this event took place.

First, where? *“By the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias.”* The town of Tiberias on the west coast of the sea had only just been established when this miracle took place. It had been built by the sycophantic Herod Antipas in honour of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, and it was only later that the name came to be used as an alternative to Galilee - John’s use of the term is unique. So in a Gospel where every word seems to have layers of meaning, you might like to ask yourself why John should use this term when, at the end of this morning’s narrative we hear how the people wanted to seize Jesus and make him their king.

There was already a long history of protest against Roman occupation. This wonder worker with all his talk about the kingdom of God looked like just the person to bring it all together. Remember how during Jesus’ trial, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, would challenge Jesus precisely about this “Are you the king of the Jews?”, how the soldiers would dress him in pseudo royal raiment - a purple robe and a crown of thorns - and how Pilate would mark the cross with the notice, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Remember too how the religious authorities at the time would cynically tell Pilate, “We have no king but Caesar.” All that horror lies ahead in the future of course, but St John is here putting down a marker about who the real king is, and about the difference between the kingdom of God and every kind of earthly power structures: questions as relevant today as ever.

Second, when? *“The Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near”.* Passover celebrates how God saved the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt and set them on their journey towards the Promised Land. In Jewish practice throughout the ages Passover is also a celebration of hope, of how God who has been a faithful saviour in the past will be so again.

John is keen to locate the feeding of the five thousand in this context, just as the Last Supper and the crucifixion would also happen at Passover. He wants to present Jesus as the new Moses, the one to deliver people from a slavery even worse than political oppression, and as the lamb ritually sacrificed at Passover as a perpetual memory.

We don't have time to do much more than scratch the surface of how St John uses this story of Jesus feeding the five thousand as an explanation of the meaning of the Eucharist, our "perpetual memory of that his most precious death until his coming again". It's so important for us to remember that the Exodus, the deliverance from Egypt, was not and is not a one off event long ago, but the pattern of how God saves throughout history. That's why the celebrations of the Passover and the Eucharist are ways of enabling us enter into the story of salvation and know it to be our own. It should also be a challenge to play our own part in the liberation of others. The kingdom of God may not be of this world, but it must be reflected in this world.

There is just one more feature of this morning's narrative I want to leave with you, a possible allusion to a prayer that may have been already in use when St John wrote his gospel. It still appears today as one of the optional offertory prayers in Common Worship. Remember the reference in the gospel to the gathering together of the scattered fragments of bread, so that nothing might be lost, gathered together into twelve baskets, symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel and thus of the unity Christ creates, and of the 12 apostles, chosen and sent as his agents in gathering all in one:

*As the grain once scattered in the fields
and the grapes once dispersed on the hillside
are now reunited on this table in bread and wine,
so, Lord, may your whole Church soon be gathered together
from the corners of the earth
into your kingdom.*