

St Alban's Sermon Sunday 25 July 2021

John 6 v. 1-21

There were times when Jesus wanted to withdraw from the crowds. He was under continuous strain and needed rest. He also needed time for prayer.

From Capernaum to the other side of the sea of Galilee was about 4 miles and Jesus set sail to the Eastern side. The people had been watching with astonishment the things he did. It was easy to see the direction the boat was taking and they hastened round the top of the lake by land. On the other side was a little plain where the grass grew. It was to be the scene of a wondrous happening.

At first, Jesus went up the hill and was sitting there with his disciples. The crowd began to appear in multitudes. We are told that the feast of the Passover was near and that meant there would be even bigger crowds.

At the sight of the crowds Jesus' sympathy was kindled. They were hungry, thirsty and tired and must be fed. Philip was the natural man to turn to for he came from Bethsaida and would have local knowledge. Jesus asked him where food could be found. Philip's answer was despairing. He calculated it would take more than 6 months wages to feed a crowd like this and where in this mountainous region would they find it anyway?

Then Andrew appeared. He had discovered a lad with five barley loaves and two little fish - his picnic lunch. Barley bread was the bread of the very poor and the fish would be no bigger than sardines.

Jesus loves small beginnings. No one ever knows what will come of it when we bring offerings to Jesus. So, he took the loaves and the fish and blessed them. He was acting like the father of the family and reflecting the Christian practice of the Eucharist. The blessing he used would be the one used own every home, "Blessed art thou O Lord our God, who causes bread to come forth from the earth."

The people ate and were filled to repletion. Was this a sacramental meal? In the rest of the chapter the language of Jesus is exactly that of the Last Supper. He talked about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." It could be that at the meal they each had but a morsel, like the sacrament. Their experience of the wonder of the presence of Jesus and the reality of God turned the small fragment into something which nurtured their spirits.

This is what happens at the communion table to this day. Perhaps when Jesus shared the small store he and the disciples had and thanked God for it the loaves and the fish were multiplied and everybody shared what they had. There was enough for all with many fragments over.

What was John's purpose in telling the story? The first and most obvious is to show that Jesus is the new Moses. He repeats one of the greatest acts of the Exodus when the Israelites were fed in superabundance with manna from heaven. Like Moses, Jesus sits them down in companies, appoints helpers to distribute the food and feeds them with miraculous bread in such quantities that there are basketfuls left over.

So in recapitulating Moses, Jesus fulfils the law. But beyond this some of the details of the story are taken from 2 Kings. There, Elisha tells a disciple to feed a hundred men with twenty loaves of barley. The disciple questions, "How can I set this before so many?" But Elisha replies, "Thus says the Lord, they shall eat and have some left."

So in recapitulating Elisha, Jesus fulfils not only the law but also the prophets. When the people saw the sign that Jesus had performed the word went round, “surely this must be the prophet who is to come into the world”. Jesus, realising that they meant to come and seize him and to proclaim him king, withdrew again to the hills by himself.

The people were waiting for a Messiah, but they visualised him in their own way. They looked for one who would be king and conqueror who would set their foot on the eagle’s neck and drive the Romans out of the land. They had seen what Jesus could do. This man has power, they thought. If we can harness him and his power to our dreams things will begin to happen. We are sometimes the same; we want Christ’s gifts without the cross.

After this event at nightfall, his disciples went down to the sea and set off by boat to cross to Capernaum. Though darkness had fallen, Jesus had not yet joined them. The sea was rough. They had rowed about 3-4 miles when they saw Jesus walking towards them on the sea.

A long strand of Old Testament tradition thought the sea especially associated with evil powers. According to an ancient creation myth, when God made the world and separated out the dry land, he had to combat monstrous forces of chaos that lived in, or were associated with, the sea.

The miracle in which Jesus walks on the water relates to a series of Old Testament texts that refer specifically to Yahweh’s power to walk on, or through the waters. God alone defeated the primal sea monster and God alone can defeat the demonic powers of chaos and evil.

As he passes by with all this background, the disciples are terrified. Jesus calls out according to my translation, “It is I, do not be afraid”. When God revealed himself to Moses he disclosed his glory and his name YHWH; the name that is disclosed is YHWH - ‘I am’.

It is no accident that having passed by the disciples in the water Jesus says to the terrified disciples not “It is I” as our English Bible misleadingly translates it but literally in the Greek “take heart I am, have no fear’. Jesus himself is seen to be none other than ‘YHWH the great’ - “I am the source and end of all that is”.

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