

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART VIII

THE MULTIPLICATION OF THE LOAVES AND THE WALKING ON WATER

I. The multiplication of the loaves once again demonstrates Jesus restoring creation and providing for His people with their cooperation. The presents Jesus as greater than Moses and prepares the way for the discourse on the Eucharist as the Bread of Life.

A. This miracle is one of the few events before Holy Week that is recorded in all four Gospels. See Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17. Matthew and Mark also describe another miraculous feeding, but that is another, albeit related, event. See Matt. 15:32-39; Mark 8:1-10.

B. In this Gospel, the setting, the miracle and the subsequent discourse, very much emphasize Jesus as the fulfillment of the role that Moses played.

1. The scene begins with the people crossing the Sea of Galilee, reminding one of the crossing of the Red Sea.

- The Gospel also refers to the sea as the Sea of Tiberius, after the city that Herod Antipas built and named after the Emperor Tiberius, who reigned from 14-37 A.D. This reference may also have been designed both to make the reference more understandable to Gentile audiences and to contrast Jesus' authority with the secular powers.

2. The timing was near Passover, the celebration of the people's freedom from the land of Egypt.

3. The people are journeying and held together by Jesus, as they journeyed through the desert under Moses. But, unlike the people who wandered in the desert, these crowds do not grumble about the lack of food or its quality. Rather, it is Jesus Himself who brings up the need for food. Contrast with Ex. 16:4-5, 17:1-2; Num. 11:1-6. They come to Jesus and travel with Him because of signs. But in this case, they are signs of healing, in contrast to the plagues that Moses sent forth.

C. As He is commonly described in the Gospel according to John, Jesus gradually draws His disciples into the miracle, first by asking them how to provide for the people.

1. He asks Philip the question, and Andrew then comes up with a partial answer. Here, as during Holy Week, Philip and

Andrew seem to work together as people who naturally deal with outsiders. See John 12:20-22. Once again the reference to money (the two hundred days' wages) seems to contrast Jesus' power with that of the world.

2. John describes Jesus as in control of the situation, testing the apostles, seeing whether they will do what at least can be done.

D. The boy offers five loaves and two fish. John makes it clear that they are barley loaves, which would have been a staple food for the poorer classes. He also has two fish, which would have been a common staple of the area, being around the Sea of Galilee.

- John also goes out of his way to emphasize how little the bread and fish are for so many. Part of the idea here is that our offerings to God may seem inadequate, but that Christ blesses them and makes them fruitful.
- The express description of the loaves as barley also connects this miracle to the multiplication of bread by Elisha near the beginning of his ministry, in the context of several miracles showing Elisha's compassion. See 2 Kings 4:42. But again, Elisha's miracle was rather less spectacular than Jesus', involving 20 loaves and 100 men.
- Saint Augustine allegorized the five barley loaves to the five books of the Law, the Torah, the keeping of which was a good offering, but alone insufficient. He allegorized the two fish to the two lines of anointed ones in the Old Testament, the kings and priests, both of which would be fulfilled in Christ. See Augustine, Tracts on the Gospel According to John 24:5.

E. The role of the Apostles that St. John emphasizes is not in the distribution of the food, but rather bringing the offering to Christ and then in gathering up the large quantity left over. St. John wants to emphasize the role of Christ as the center of the miracle. However, as with the baptisms early on, it can be inferred that the Apostles were distributing the bread on behalf of Jesus. See John 2:1 ff. The other Gospels make this role of the Apostles more clear.

- The instruction to recline also emphasizes the idea of a Sabbath rest. Part of the notion is that, once we have brought Jesus what we have, it is important to rest with the Lord (i.e. to pray and worship) that He may pour out His blessings upon us.

F. John makes it clear that Jesus "gave thanks" for the bread. The word for thanksgiving in Greek is eucharisistien, which early on

came into common use for the Mass. See, e.g., The Didache 9; St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Philadelphians 4; Letter to the Smyrneans 7-8. Thus, St. John emphasizes the connection of this miracle to the Mass. The other Gospels emphasize that Jesus looked up to heaven, said the blessing, broke the bread, and gave it to the Apostles, thus emphasizing the connection to their descriptions of the Last Supper, which will then describe the Eucharist. It is the same point, made in a different way/

G. The people draw the connection between Jesus and Moses, and celebrate Him as the prophet whom God had promised through Moses, the one who would speak for God as Moses did. See Duet. 18:15. The people may also be recalling the words of Malachi that God would again bless people if they make proper offerings to Him and send a new prophet before the day of the Lord. See Malachi 3.

H. The people also see in Jesus the king who will bring about a new creation. The last king had been exiled in 586 B.C. and the line of Davidic kings was lost to history. But the prophets had spoken of a new king who would arise and bring about a time of glorious peace, prosperity and true worship that would attract all nations. See, e.g., Is. 8:23-9:6; Jer. 32:36-33:25; Micah 5:1-4; Haggai 2:6-9; Zech. 7:9-15, 8:1-23. However, because they misunderstand the idea of a king as primarily one who will solve economic problems, and because the time for His kingdom had not yet come, Jesus goes away.

- Eleven hundred years earlier, the Chosen People had blundered by demanding a king for the wrong reasons and at the wrong time. And the kings of Israel (and then Israel and Judah) generally led them downhill. See 1 Sam. 8. Here, Jesus is correcting that mistake and, like David (who refused to seize the crown until Saul had been killed by others) allowing the plan of God to work in the proper time.

I. In addition to all of the symbolism, there is also the basic level at which Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, cares for His people and provides even for worldly needs.

II. The next miracle, the walking on water, also emphasizes Jesus as greater than Moses and points more to His divinity.

A. John feels no need to say why the Apostles went on across the lake without Jesus. Mark makes it clear that Jesus sent them across so that He would have time for prayer. See Mark 6:45. In this way, He is again like Moses who went up the mountain for prayer when God appeared. However, again Jesus shows His superiority to Moses. For, when Moses was on the mountain, the people lost no time in turning to the golden calf. Here, however, they go in pursuit of Jesus.

B. The wind stirring up the waters reminds one of the wind that separated the Red Sea. Here, however, Jesus acts on His own power, while Moses had to wait for God's instructions after the complaints of the people. See Ex. 14:21. Jesus then simply walks on the water, which the prophets never do, but the Old Testament rather associates with God Himself. See, e.g., Job 9:8; Ps. 29:3; 74:12-14, 77:17-20; Is. 43:16. Ironically, St. John's phrasing is closest to Job, who spoke about how distant God was from him. See Job 9. The description of Isaiah of God's saving power by analogy to the calming of waters also precedes the prophet's discourse on the replacement of the cup of wrath with the cup of blessing. See Is. 51:9-10. And likewise this miracle precedes the description of Jesus as the Bread and Blood that confers God's blessing.

C. The strong wind has also been taken as a symbol of the forces opposing the Church by many commentators, such as Sts. Thomas Aquinas and Augustine in their commentaries to John.

D. They are afraid of Jesus, although St. John does not explain why. Matthew and Mark expressly say that the Apostles thought He was a ghost. John emphasizes more the Apostle's natural fear, or possibly trembling in the presence of the Divine Jesus' response is twofold:

- The expression "It is I" again reflects the name God gave Himself at the burning bush. Ex. 3:14.
- The instruction "Be not afraid" is a common instruction that God gives His People and His prophets in the Old Testament, either in the presence of God (or an angel) or in the context of confronting enemies. See, e.g., Judges 6:23; Tobit 13:17; Is. 8:12, 10:24; Jer 1:8, 2:12; Ezek. 2:6; Joel 2:21-22. See also Prov. 3:24-25.

E. Here, the Apostles arrive immediately at the shore. There is a contrast with the Chosen People, who were supposed to go immediately from Mount Sinai into the Promised Land, but who were afraid to do so, and therefore, wandered for 38 additional years. See Num. 13-14; Duet. 1:19-40. Once again, Jesus' guidance is greater than that of Moses.