

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART IX

THE BREAD OF LIFE DISCOURSE AND PETER'S PROFESSION OF FAITH

I. After the miraculous feeding, Jesus uses the occasion to begin His teachings on the Eucharist.

A. The scene opens with Jesus on the north side of the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum. The distance by Sea of Galilee was not great (probably about six or seven miles), although the rough waters made it difficult. The passage by land was much longer, and so the people naturally wonder how Jesus could have arrived so soon.

- There is perhaps a connection to the miraculous crossing of Moses, Joshua, Elijah and Elisha over waters, in those cases by parting them.

- Because it was across the Sea, the chances are that the journey began somewhere slightly south of Tiberius and ended slightly east of Capernaum, near Genesareth, as indicated by the parallel scene in Mark. (Mark adds that they were headed to Bethsaida, but presumably blown off course, which would explain how they came to land more quickly than expected.)

B. The crowds ask Jesus when He arrived, possibly thinking that He had somehow gotten a secret means of transportation, or had rushed by land to get there.

C. Jesus tries to raise their sights higher, to perceive that His miraculous feeding was not just a wonder, but a "sign" of something greater, which He will now explain.

- The idea is that they saw the miracle, but did not understand what it was signifying, i.e., that Jesus would now raise the Providence of God even further, to providing the bread for eternal life. Jesus is now picking up on a theme from the Old Testament that God allowed the people to hunger in the desert and then fed them with bread to teach them to seek, not only physical bread, but also the word of God. See Deut. 8:3. The Wisdom literature also had a notion of feasting at the table of wisdom. See Prov. 9:1-9; Sir. 1:14-16.

- Jesus describes Himself as the Son of Man who will give this bread at last. He adds that the Lord has "set His seal" upon

Him. He may be referring to the witnesses Jesus has just described that should tell people of His divine calling. St. Paul will later refer to the seal being placed in turn upon all the faithful, as the Spirit who guarantees God's promise. See 2 Cor. 1:21-22; see also Ezek. 9:4ff ; Rev. 7:3.

D. Called by Jesus to work for the food of heaven, the people then understandably ask what they should do to accomplish such works.

1. Jesus then uses another paradox to indicate that it is the work of God to believe in His representative.

2. The people now themselves ask for a sign, referring back to the manna Moses gave, calling it the "bread of heaven." Psalms 78 and 105 referred to the manna as the "bread of heaven" in describing God's powerful works in saving His people. It is ironic that Psalms 78 also describes the people's refusal to trust in God despite these wonders. Rabbinic literature had predicted that the Messiah would again be able to bring manna from the desert. See, e.g., 2 Apocalypse of Baruch 29:8.

3. Jesus, again calling God "my Father," something even Moses would not do, says that the manna Moses gave was not as real as the "true bread" from heaven, again describing it as a symbol.

- As the woman asked for the life giving water, now the people ask for that bread forever, a request Jesus will satisfy.

4. This dialogue sets up the main part of the bread of life discourse, in which Jesus describes Himself as the bread of life. As with the Samaritan woman, Jesus takes them gradually to the truth.

E. In the first part of His discourse, Jesus describes Himself as the bread of life who gives salvation.

1. He takes on a greater role similar to Wisdom, but greater than that, for Wisdom can provide a feast and comfort, but not a promise that one will never hunger or thirst again, which was an indication of a state beyond suffering, i.e. heaven.

2. Jesus describes Himself as sent from heaven, i.e. the abode of God. In doing His Father's will (distinguished but Jesus' will, although the two are in perfect harmony), He brings eternal life. The Wisdom literature and the Books of Daniel and

Maccabees had promised such life to the faithful, but without indicating how it would be given. See Wis. 3:1-9; Dan. 12:2-3; 2 Macc. 7:23, 29, 33-38.

3. Belief and receipt of the "bread of life" are connected. For, without faith, the Eucharist is not only unhelpful, but harmful, as the end of the chapter will indicate. By belief one sees the Son in this bread and will be raised on "the last day." This last day is probably a play on words, meaning both the last day of earthly history, and the last day of the week, which in the Jewish mind set would be the Sabbath. Heaven is, in a sense, the never-ending Sabbath; or to put it in another way, the Sabbath is meant to be a first promise of heaven.

- Jesus emphasizes His determination that no one whom the Father gives should be lost, for God will now give them the "bread of life." There is perhaps a symbolic connection to Jesus insisting that none of the fragments of bread at the miraculous feeding be left behind.

4. At this point, the people "murmur" again Jesus, as they had done again God in the desert. See Ex. 16:2, 7-8; 17:2.

- The people have trouble believing that Jesus is come down from heaven. They may have picked up upon His claim to a divine origin, or they may have simply thought He was saying that He was sent forth by a divine call, as the prophets were, but still cannot believe that one of such humble origins was sent from God. Unlike Nathaniel or even Nicodemus, they do not directly bring their objections to Jesus.

5. Jesus then emphasizes that, in order for anyone to come to Him, the Father must draw him. Although it is not the term Jesus uses, grace is always first, with a response in faith. This development brings out a double meaning to Jesus' previous statement that to believe in God's representative is "the work of God." Here He makes it clear that this belief is also work done by God.

- In describing this drawing of people by God to Him, Jesus refers to two Messianic prophecies which say, "They shall all be taught by God" or similar words. See Is. 54:13; Jer. 31:34. Isaiah's vision in particular comes right after the vision of the suffering servant who saves God's people by giving His life for them. The idea is that, in the former covenant, prophets and other representatives of God were needed because the people could not be in God's presence or hear His words directly. But in the future age, people will be able to be with Him more directly.

6. Jesus then says that eternal life is not simply a future promise of the last day on earth, but in some way experienced even now by those willing to believe. There is a theme of restoration of the Tree of Life from the Garden of Eden.

- The implication is that a failure in belief keeps one from eternal life. St. Paul likewise says draws a parallel between Jesus and the manna of the desert, pointing out that those who refused to trust in God never entered the Promised Land. See 1 Cor. 10.
- Jesus contrasts the manna in the desert, which was but a symbol, and therefore could only forestall death, with the bread He will give.
- There is also a contrast with the word of God that Ezekiel eats in the form of an edible scroll. See Ex. 3:1 ff. That scroll, however, was one of judgment, for it only set forth the sins of Israel. Alone it could not cleanse them. See also Rev. 19:9. It would instead be the life giving water from the Temple that would cleanse. See Ex. 47.

F. Jesus then makes it more clear exactly how He will be the bread of life, i.e., by giving His flesh for the life of the world.

1. If Jesus ended with this statement, it would be arguable that the bread to be eaten is simply a belief that Jesus gave His body on the Cross and that one symbolically eats it by belief.

2. However, in reply to an astonished response, Jesus emphasizes five times in succession the literal meaning with no attempt to explain it allegorically.

- The Gospel uses the word for "flesh" (in Greek "sarx"), rather than "body" (in Greek "soma") to emphasize even more the literalness of His meaning. In verse 54, the Gospel also begins using the word trogein (to chew), rather than estein (to eat.)
- He also adds the notion of drinking His blood, which would be truly puzzling symbolism if not literally true. Blood is the symbol of life in Jewish thought, see, e.g., Gen. 9:6; Deut 12:23, 15:23, so to drink Jesus' blood is to share in His life.
- In addition, Jesus emphasizes how necessary eating and drinking Him will be, for those that fail to do so does not

have life with God (although of course such a person may later come to life.)

3. With the theme of the Exodus, the discourse could have reminded the people of the Passover, in which their ancestors consumed the Passover Lamb and were thus identified as the people of God and set toward the Promised Land. The blood of the Lamb, sprinkled on the doorpost, is what saved the first born from the angel of death. Ex. 12:7-13. However, even there, the people did not consume the blood of the Lamb, for they were not sharing in its life. Here, however, Jesus says that His faithful will consume His blood, sharing in His life from heaven.

II. Many disciples turn away from Jesus because of this discourse, but that very lack of faith sets the stage for Peter's profession of faith.

A. Many people again murmur at the difficulty. Jesus is again calling them to a faith that will later be fulfilled in understanding.

B. Jesus asks what if they were to see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before, thus again clearly indicating that Jesus is from heaven.

- He may be referring to the Son of Man prophecies of Daniel and telling them that, if they really believe in those astonishing things, they should be able to accept this one as well. He may also be indicating that, because we cannot see the Son of Man in His glory, He will come to us in another form, which will be explained as the Eucharist.

- Jesus goes on to say that "the flesh" does not help. When speaking to Nicodemus, he meant by "the flesh," things of this earth. See John 3:6. He is now explaining that His flesh is of value because He is of the realm of the spirit, although He of course has taken flesh.

- Jesus may also mean that even His flesh is of no avail without faith. Cf. 1 Cor. 11:23ff.

- Jesus also knows that some do not really believe, i.e. are only willing to believe Him if He can prove His point. In one sense, He does not fully blame them, for He also says that such faith can only be granted by the Father. But John also indicates darkly that at this point, it became clearer that Judas Iscariot would betray Him

C. Jesus poignantly asks His disciples whether they also will leave Him. Here, Peter makes a crucial profession of faith, not

saying that he understands Jesus, but placing his trust in the words of Jesus, "the words of everlasting life." The words of God bring life to those willing to hear, especially because Jesus is the Holy One of God. Cf. Ez. 37. It is not entirely clear whether Peter fully understands what he is saying when he describes Jesus as "the Holy One of God." It is true that the people of Israel, for all their faults, were called the "holy nation" of God, see Ex. 19:6, Duet. 7:1-6; Jer. 2:3, but this title was not given to an individual person. Rather, God alone is the Holy One. Cf. Lev. 17; Is. 6:3ff.