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Worship Resources

Exegetical Notes for August Lectionary Readings

Signs and Loaves (John 6:24–35)

This section of John's sixth chapter is part of a bridge passage which leads from the narrative of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand (via the story of the disciples' and Jesus' crossing of the lake) to Jesus' conversation with the crowds who had got left behind on the other side after the feeding. How had they met up again with Jesus?

Our Gospel reading, rather awkwardly, starts in the middle of John's explanation. What we learn is this: after the feeding, Jesus had slipped away onto the mountain to avoid being caught up by the crowd, who were so impressed by his miracle that they wanted to make him king (fulfilling some kind of messianic expectation?). Jesus' disciples had got away from them by taking the only boat home, and the crowds had seen this. They had also seen that Jesus hadn't got into it, though he was evidently no longer around, and had, as we know, walked home across the lake. They are clearly mystified but still eager to find Jesus, and some conveniently passing boats convey them to the 'other side of the lake' where they find Jesus, presumably with his disciples. All this culminates, quite naturally, in their question to Jesus: Rabbi when did you get here? Though maybe one would more naturally have expected: *how* did you get here?

There then follows an extraordinary series of exchanges between Jesus and the crowds where, as often in John's Gospel, no one quite seems to be responding to what the other says. Jesus doesn't answer their question but accuses them: they have come because their bellies had been filled and not because they had 'seen signs', i.e. they had not understood the deeper meaning to which the feeding miracle was pointing. Jesus then utters the saying which provides the starting point and much of the metaphorical content of the long discourse which follows, which is formally delivered in three exchanges: first with the crowd (vv. 26–40), then

with the Jews (vv. 41–59) and finally, after a little note to say that all this happened in the synagogue, with the disciples (vv. 60–65, 71).

The sentence which starts this long section off is tantalisingly related but unrelated to what has gone before: 'Labour not for the bread which perishes/gets lost but for the bread which remains into everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you; for on him the Father has put his seal of approval.'

This is a remarkable example of how Jesus discourses in John. He is constantly picking up things he's said elsewhere and giving them a new twist and emphasis, or responding, sometimes quite indirectly, to things said to him. The whole is taken up into an ongoing meditation which seeks to draw his readers more deeply into the mystery of the Word-made-flesh. For instance, when Jesus tells them not to labour for the food *which perishes*, he's using same word he used in v. 12, when he gave the command to gather up all the pieces of bread which were left over *lest they be lost*, but also in 3:16 where he talks about God's sending his son so that no one should die or perish. The notion of working or labouring has surfaced in chapter 5 where Jesus says that his works 'bear me witness that the Father has sent me'. It could be said that the crowds have worked hard to get in touch with Jesus. They certainly respond by asking how to do the works of God. Jesus is much less interested in work as such than in seeking the – true – gifts of God. (Is there some hidden critique of the law here: don't *do* what the law says – the 'works of God' according to Moses – but *seek* the gift of life which Jesus *gives*. And that, ironically, is what in a confused if energetic way, they had been doing. What they now need to do, the true work of God, is to believe in 'him whom he has sent'.

One key to preaching on this passage lies in this cluster of ideas: working, seeking, giving, believing, asking. The opening of the story is about the crowds looking for Jesus to make him their king: by the end, they have reached the point where they can

ask Jesus: Lord give us this bread always. What has happened in between? They have been rebuffed for their striving, labouring for physical satisfaction and encouraged to believe in the eternal life to which Jesus' 'signs' point. Believing, trusting in the God to whom Jesus' 'works' bear witness, is the real work that people need to do. The crowds have then engaged in a little rear-guard action, a scriptural debate about manna and who gave what bread when, Moses or Jesus. Why should they look to him when Moses has given bread too? And they have been confronted with Jesus' claim that the – true – 'bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world'. This is a present, universal gift of life, which endures, lasts, doesn't perish (the fathers, as Jesus says later, v. 48, ate the manna and they're all dead). What they need to 'do' in the first instance is not to do anything at all, but rather to receive the gift of divine life, the bread of life from heaven. The passage, that is to say, sees a subtle reorientation of the crowd's goals and desires. They start by seeking a leader who will give them food to eat, help them to survive, to thrive even. They end up being open to the possibility of following a 'messiah' who gives himself in a way which will turn all their expectations upside down, out of which will come a life beyond all expectation.

JOHN RICHES

Jesus, The Real Presence of God

(John 6:35, 41–51)

Famously, there is no last supper account in John's Gospel, no words of institution, and no commandment to continue the celebration of a eucharistic meal. Notwithstanding this, because of the 'Bread of Life' discourse in chapter 6, many have detected a highly developed theology of Eucharist, including the notion of real presence (or even transubstantiation) in the fourth gospel. Interpretation of these verses has been a source of division between Christians, and not only in creating separation between Catholics and Protestants. Luther and Calvin also stood in fundamental disagreement over the doctrine of the real presence in the elements, and these verses played no small part in that dispute. Yet one is left wondering, when these verses are read in context, if they actually have much to do with Eucharistic theology at all.

How stupid can you be? Or was it a case of being just plain perverse? After the multitude has gathered in a remote location, Jesus performs one of those memorable feeding miracles narrated in all four gospels. Then, after this miraculous provision to assuage their hunger, the crowd has the gall to ask Jesus what sign he will perform to verify his prophetic status; after all, they remind Jesus, when Moses led the people out of Egypt 'our fathers ate manna in the wilderness' (vv. 30–31). Have they just taken lessons in being dim or intentionally obtuse? Can they not see that they have just experienced a miracle of the same character as that which they are now demanding? The truth is they are portrayed by the fourth evangelist as being so thick and spiritually out of tune with God that they fail to perceive that they have been provided with their very request before they asked. More importantly, their lack of spiritual perception is so obscured that they cannot recognize Jesus for who he is. Even when Jesus makes the symbolic disclosure that he himself is the bread of life (v. 35), it does not evoke faith, but grumbling. In response 'the Jews', the designation John uses for those inhabitants of Judaea who oppose Jesus, throw their knowledge of Jesus' family background back at him. They know who he really is – the son of Joseph, and his parents are the source of his origin. How can he claim heavenly descent? But Jesus does not back off, instead he reasserts his claims more stridently. The Father draws people to Jesus and he will raise such people up on the last day (v. 44); those who hear the Father come to Jesus (v. 45); Jesus, the one sent from the Father, is the only one who has seen the Father (v. 46); to believe in Jesus is to have eternal life (v. 47); he is the bread of life (v. 48); feeding on him is protection against death (vv. 49–50); and he gives his flesh for the life of the world (v. 51). This is no dispassionate set of claims. They demand response. Jesus claims to be God's appointed envoy; to encounter Jesus is to encounter the Father and thereby receive life.

What is one to make of such claims? First, they seem to exclude all other forms of revelation. Moses and the manna eaten by the Exodus generation are at best a foreshadowing of the true envoy of God and the real heavenly food. The passage does seem to teach a concept of 'real presence', but it is the real presence of God through his appointed ambassador. The claims Jesus makes require some kind of sacrificial actualization through the giving

of his flesh (v. 51), and only then can the eternal life he offers be experienced by those who accept him as God's envoy. John calls upon his readers to look beyond the physical reality of a man born of human parents, who multiplies bread and fish in the wilderness. He wants the eyes of faith to perceive what this reveals about Jesus, no ordinary man, not even another prophet, but the true presence of God among humanity.

Life imparting heavenly manna,
Smitten rock with streaming side,
Heaven and earth with loud hosanna,
Worship you the Lamb who died.
Alleluia, Alleluia,
Risen, ascended, glorified

PAUL FOSTER

Life, Incarnation and The Eucharist (John 6:51–58)

Throughout John's gospel human beings seek life. Some seek life in terms of healing, such as the lame man at the pool at Bethzatha who has no one to help him reach the waters, and the blind man who wishes to receive sight so that he no longer needs to sit and beg for his living. Others find life when they taste the water transformed into wine at the wedding at Cana, or they yearn for life-giving water as in the description of the Samaritan woman who does not want to walk to the well every day. In John's gospel the desire for life is depicted in terms of the human need for food and water and rest. At the feeding of the five thousand, the life Jesus brings is portrayed in terms of the abundant bread he gives to the hungry crowds.

Our passage comes at the close of Jesus' bread of life discourse. Crowds have flocked to Jesus because they have seen the signs that he was doing for the sick. When Jesus feeds the hungry crowds, they pursue him to take him by force and to make him king, but Jesus withdraws to the mountain by himself. He later comes to his disciples walking across the lake. These narratives are set at the time of Passover, and they recall the accounts of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Moses gave the Israelites manna to eat in the desert, and now Jesus miraculously multiplies five loaves and two fish to feed a crowd of five thousand. Our

account, however, leads to conflict among the crowd. Jesus not only gives the people bread, he is giving them his own flesh to eat.

There have been two key interpretations of this passage. The first focuses on the incarnation, because Jesus describes himself as the living bread that came down from heaven. The descent language points to the pre-existence of Jesus and his entry into the world. In the prologue Jesus is described as the word made flesh, and in this passage he gives humanity his flesh. Jesus' gift of his flesh also alludes to his death. In John 3:16 God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. In our passage Jesus expresses his mission in terms of his care for the world, since he is giving his flesh for the life of the world. Those who eat his flesh and drink his blood abide in him, and he abides in them. Human beings are caught up into the life shared by Jesus and God, and this life extends into eternity.

The second interpretation of our passage emphasizes the Johannine allusions to the Eucharist. In the synoptic gospels, the Last Supper is a Passover meal, and Jesus identifies the bread with his body and the wine with his blood. When human beings eat the bread and drink the wine they are sharing in the body and blood of Christ. In our account, the life Jesus brings is thus received in the celebration of the Eucharist. But why does John place these allusions to the Eucharist here rather than at the Last Supper? In John's Gospel, Jesus responds to the hungry crowds, and his teaching on the bread of life flows from this sign. Throughout John's gospel the life Jesus brings is depicted in terms of tasting wine, drinking water, and eating bread. The allusions to the Eucharist in the course of Jesus' mission connect his gift of life to the needs of human beings for food in order to sustain life, and the gift of eternal life is experienced in midst of every day life.

SUSAN MILLER

Harsh Sayings, Words of Life (John 6:56–69)

The beginning of this lectionary reading 'concludes' Jesus' teaching about his flesh and blood with the enigmatic words: 'The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him ... the one who eats me will

also live through me' (6:56, 57). The word 'eat' in these verses could even be translated 'chew'. If this is indeed John's interpretation of the Eucharist, then it is perhaps no wonder that the phrase 'the one who chews my flesh' has not featured in liturgical tradition. We are left to respond as the disciples: 'This is a harsh saying; who can listen to it?' C. K. Barrett comments that what is meant here is not 'difficult to understand', but rather 'unacceptable', 'harsh', 'offensive'. Indeed the Old Testament clearly prohibited the eating of blood (Lev 17:10-14). But Jesus takes offence at the disciples' offence. Don't they realize that he has been speaking to them the words of life?

This passage hinges on the everyday and the eternal, the ordinary and the spiritual. The relationships between Jesus and his disciples are challenged with strong words, broken and affirmed. Some cease to follow him (v. 66). Simon Peter proclaims belief in Jesus as God's holy one (v. 68; cf. Mark 1:24 where it is an unclean spirit who make this proclamation!). And Judas is destined to betray him (vv. 64, 70-71). In verse 56, those who abide in Jesus are those who eat his flesh and blood, yet clearly not all of the disciples are able to accept the demands of this kind of abiding fellowship. Later, in chapter 15 of John's gospel, a model for abiding exists between Jesus and his Father. In similar fashion, Jesus, his words, and his love abide in the disciples (and the disciples abide in him). The disciples also abide with the Spirit of truth (John 14:17). Yet here, in chapter 6, we find that many of Jesus' disciples 'drew back and no longer went about with him' (v. 66). Were they unable to accept Jesus' words about his flesh and blood, or does the reference go back further, to the essence of who Jesus was and the things he was doing? Jesus must even turn to his closest group of followers, the twelve, with the question, 'Do you also wish to go away?' We find that Jesus knows those who did

not believe in him and the one who would betray him (v. 64). This is a painful kind of knowledge and perhaps it raises the question of whether knowing that some will not have faith in us or will be disloyal to us makes the experience any easier to bear. John shows us a picture in which some of those we would expect to display the fiercest loyalty to Jesus actually lose faith and betray him.

Those who desert Jesus seem to be relying on the wrong sort of flesh. A curious aspect of the passage lies in the negative reference to the flesh in verse 63. Previously, the necessity of partaking in Jesus' flesh was emphasized, and now Jesus says, 'It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.' This flesh is different, and is opposed to the Spirit. We might compare this with Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 3:65-66: 'Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life.' Discipleship means accepting the life of the Spirit, and not focusing one's hopes in the flesh (v. 62). The kind of flesh which is transient fades like flowers and can disappoint – even delude – us in our hopes and desires. In contrast, Jesus' flesh gives us hope as transient humans and allows us into relationship with the Father and Son in the life-giving Spirit. Jesus reveals a different reality in his words, and Peter recognizes this in his confession. Some disciples, like Peter, have truly believed in Jesus and his words and have made them a foundation for a life of discipleship.

We are invited to chew on this Word: Jesus is our food. He brings eternal life and spirit, but he is also embodied in daily, weekly life and relationships: both necessary and ingestible.

KAREN WENELL



What a book the Holy Bible is! What a miracle and what strength is given with it to man!
Just like a sculpture of the world and man and human characters and everything is named
there and everything is shown for ever and ever.

– From the Elder Zosima in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*