

The first half of John's Gospel is built round seven great signs that Jesus performs. At the conclusion of the Gospel the narrator tells us that there were many other things that Jesus did, "if all of them were written down, I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jn. 21,25). The evangelist is selective in choosing just seven of the many acts of power from the many he knew about and might have described. The seven are a representative selection which show characteristic types of Jesus actions.

The first sign (the word 'miracle' is never used in the fourth Gospel) is at Cana in Galilee when there is a near-crisis at a wedding ceremony. The wine has run out. In small town Jewish society memories were long and a wedding where hospitality was curtailed would be long remembered and the family recalled in shame. For the many days of the celebration the guests had to be fed as much food as they wanted to consume and be able to imbibe without limit. As the wine diminished the size of the catastrophe increased. But all the people noticed was that the wine improved. It is a strange sign that passes unnoticed. But the disciples, whose presence and capacious thirst, some think, may have caused the crisis, the disciples see his glory and they believe. Glory will be a key theme of Jesus' displays of power.

The second sign also occurs in Cana. The dying son of an official is healed at a distance. There are no witnesses to this act, just a coincidence of time. When Jesus spoke the son far away revived. The official was convinced. He and his whole household believed. The purpose of the signs is becoming clear already – to bring people to faith.

A healing is also the third sign. This one to a man crippled for thirty-eight years who shows no interest in being healed, does not recognise his benefactor, and shops him to the authorities when he does know his identity thus causing the leaders to persecute the Lord. The sign can also be a challenge to those who will refuse to believe.

There is a change with the fourth and central sign of Jesus' power. He feeds five thousand men with five barley loaves and two fish. The people want to make him king. This very public act has stirred rebellion. Jesus withdrew. To reappear performing his fifth sign. He walks on the water as the wind howls. Waters are often symbolic of death. Having power over sea and wind is an attribute of God. Jesus gives a homily to explain the meaning of the feeding. He reminds the people that God gave their ancestors bread in the desert. Now God gives them food which will bring them eternal life. This food is Jesus' very self – his flesh to be eaten, his blood to be drunk. It nearly causes a riot. His language is intolerable. Even his followers begin to

drift away. But Peter speaks out -"You have the message of eternal life, and we believe."

We, who are listening to the Gospel, have known since the opening chapter that "The Word (is) God" and "The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us". We are aware that Jesus has great powers to discern what people are and he knows their history. He can look at Nathanael and know "Here is an Israelite incapable of deceit"; he knows the marital history of the Woman of Samaria - her five husbands and the man she is now with to whom she is not married. Now Jesus is acting with the authority of God, giving life to the sick, feeding multitudes, walking on the waters. The authorities begin to accuse him of blasphemy, acting as if he is God. How perceptive they are in their ignorance.

The sixth sign we heard and reflected upon last week. A man born blind is healed so that the glory of God might be revealed . Never in the history of the world has this happened. In the face of opposition and threats the man now sighted affirms that he is the Son of Man and he believes. The opposition to Jesus deepens.

All this build up to the climactic seventh sign. It is another domestic tragedy. Jesus is a family friend of Lazarus and his two sisters. They send word that Lazarus is ill, and Jesus does nothing. He explains to the uncomprehending disciples that God's glory will be revealed. Lazarus is four days dead when they arrive at Bethany. After three days, in popular belief the person had departed, for the non-existence of *Sheol* and corruption set in to the body.

With irony characteristic of the fourth evangelist Jesus gives life and seals his own fate. Scarcely have the wrappings been taken from the revived Lazarus' uncorrupted flesh than the Sanhedrin is in session, chaired by the artful, ruthless Joseph Caiaphas. It is agreed. "Better that one man die than that the nation be destroyed". The life-giver is to die, but by his death the way of salvation for the nation and the world will be opened.

But as John well knew when he was writing, Caiaphas' scheming would not save his nation. Less than forty years later Jerusalem would be razed, the Temple a smoking ruin at the hands of the Romans.

Jesus gives life, restoring Lazarus, his friend, to the delights and sorrows of this world. His gift points to a greater restoration which he will bring about. And it confirms what we were told at the outset for as we all know, and the Jewish Scriptures announce: God is the author of life. It is God's Spirit that animates and the withdraw of that Spirit is death. The one who animates the dead is God among us.

Jesus' identity as 'one with the Father' (cf Jn.10,30), never hidden in the Gospel, is

now made clear to all. The Father's glory is his glory, and will be in those who believe in him. That glory will be fully manifest in the manner of his own dying.