

We are in the year of Mark, Cycle B in the three year cycle of Sunday readings. We have reached the place in Mark's Gospel where we hear about the feeding of the five thousand. However, for reasons known only to the compiler of the lectionary, we transfer to the Fourth Gospel. For the whole of the six weeks of the Summer holidays we will be listening to John, and a single chapter of John, namely chapter VI. Today we hear the story of the Feeding, and over the following weeks the aftermath – Jesus' preaching in the synagogue at Capharnaum, and the audience's reaction to his challenging words.

There are six accounts of a miraculous feeding in the four Gospels. Both Mark and Matthew add a feeding of four thousand to that of the five thousand which is present in each Gospel. Each evangelist having described the feeding of five thousand men with five loaves and two fish then goes on to tell about Jesus' walking on the waters. These events were clearly linked in the tradition. Strangely, we do not hear that in the sequence of readings over the next six weeks.

All the evangelists are seeking to help the reader answer the question: "Who is this man, Jesus?" They offer various possible, but never satisfactory, parallels from great figures of the past. He resembles Elisha who fed his men from a few loaves. That parallel is drawn to our attention in the readings today. But immediately we notice Elisha fed a hundred men with twenty barley loaves. Hardly a comparison with Jesus. On other occasions we see Jesus as a new Moses; or there are parallels with Jeremiah or another of the great prophets. All are significant but none are exact. Jesus is always greater than the greatest of the prophets of old.

All the evangelists say about Jesus what is said in the ancient Scriptures about God. Jesus is 'Lord' (*kyrios*), the Greek word used to translate the unpronounceable name of God in the Scriptures. The implication is clear. What can be said of God can also be said of Jesus. In Mark, Matthew and Luke, the identification is always close but never explicit. For John Jesus is 'Lord' but he is also God. The identification is clear. In the first verses of the Gospel, "The Word was with God and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"; and at the climax after the Resurrection Thomas declares Jesus to be, "My Lord and my God". This divine aspect of Jesus is expressed in Jesus' knowledge. He knows that Nathanael is an Israelite who is incapable of deceit. He knows the woman of Samaria has had five husbands and is not married to her current amour. He knows that Lazarus is dead and that he will wake him. In today's story he knows exactly what he is going to do to feed the crowds. He asks Philip as a test.

Consequently in John there is no Transfiguration scene. Jesus is always with the Father. He is as much a heavenly being as he is an earthly one. And there are no temptations in the fourth Gospel as there are in the other three, briefly in Mark more

fully described in Matthew and Luke. Remember what those temptations are about: Food, sating hunger by turning stones into loaves; a big sign, throwing himself off the pinnacle of the Temple; and Power, authority over all nations. In the Feeding story we have the issue of hunger and food; we have later the demand for a sign (this one clearly being insufficient!); and the crowds wish to make Jesus their king. All the elements of the temptations are here but altered. There is no suggestion that Jesus is being tested, or that he is likely to succumb to weakness. He has no weaknesses. But John seems to know the tradition and alludes to it, but he has transposed it. Jesus is not tempted here by the crowds, nor will he be by Pilate who asks if he is a king. Jesus is a king but not a king like any earthly ruler. He is a king who will reign from the cross; and if we are to be his followers then that is our glorious destiny too.

In John's Gospel there are seven signs. He has clearly selected his material from a larger store. The feeding is number four of the seven. It is the middle and that gives it an importance. It is also the one whose implications are most developed. In the conclusion to the first 'sign' (John never calls them miracles) we are simply told 'he let his glory be seen and the disciples believed in him. After the last and most significant sign, the raising of Lazarus, we hear the High Priest Caiaphas declare; "It is better that one man die than the nation be destroyed". But here a long chapter is devoted to expanding the implications of Jesus' action. He not only gives bread, he is the Bread, come down from heaven, which gives Life to the world. A truth we will be exploring in the weeks to come.