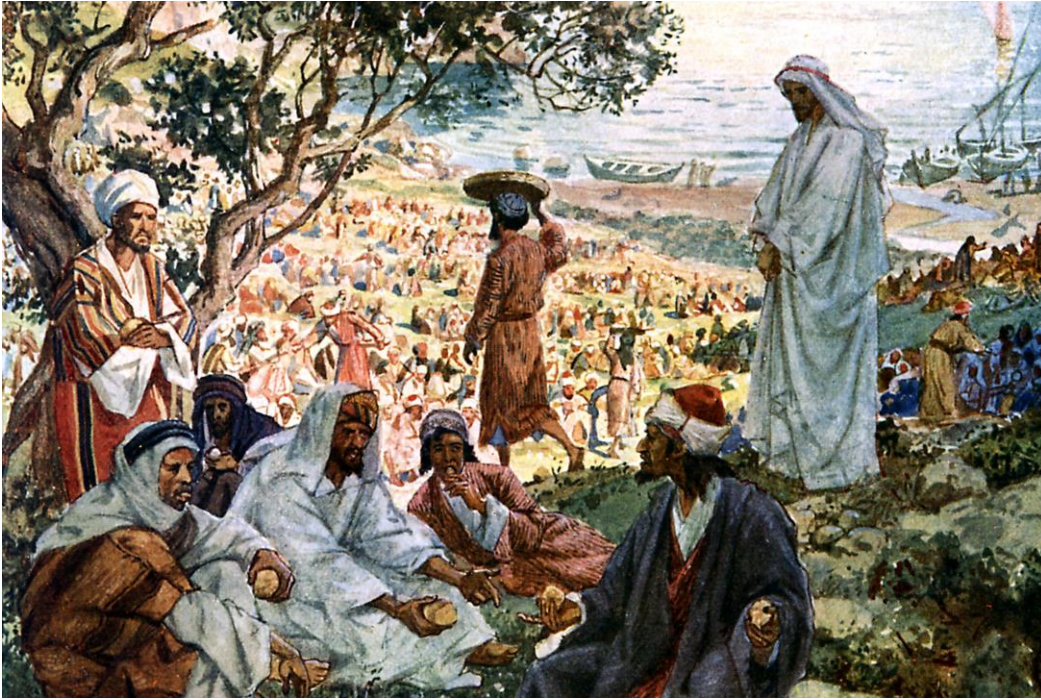


Bread of Heaven



Fourth Gospel 6:41 "Then the Jews began to complain about (Jesus) because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.' They were saying, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?'"

Today's Gospel is part of a long and elaborate discourse which has been the focus of the Gospel readings for the last two weeks and which continues on for another two weeks. Yet because the narrative is so long and so broken up, we often miss out on one of the turning points in Jesus' ministry. To understand the real significance of this event, we need to look at the whole picture.

At the beginning of this story, shortly after his Baptism by John, Jesus and his disciples have returned from a religious festival in Jerusalem and have come back home to Galilee. When Jesus came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, we are told, since they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the festival; for they too had gone to the festival. What exactly had Jesus done at the festival? Well, in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus had just cleansed the Temple, an impressive prophetic act, reminiscent of John the Baptist's preaching that the Temple was defiled! After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, where a large crowd kept following him, because, we are told, they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus and his disciples were actively engaged in a ministry of healing and the crowds were responding!

Then there follows the familiar story of the feeding of the five thousand, the only miracle story that appears in all four Gospels. One interpretation of this story reminds us that most of the people there were followers of John the Baptist, and goes further to suggest that many, if not all of the people in the crowd actually had something with them to eat, but had not yet brought it out into the open for fear that they would then have to share what they had with all the others present and that there would then not be enough to go around. But the willingness of the young boy to share his meager five barley loaves and two

fish among so many thousands moved the others to bring out their foodstuffs as well, and as a result all thus ate and were satisfied and there was food aplenty. I think this is a particularly telling account of the story if one remembers that when the crowds earlier on the banks of the Jordan asked John the Baptist "What then shall we do (to be bearing good fruit worthy of repentance)?" (Lk. 3.10), John the Baptist had replied "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." Thus, Jesus and his disciples in this interpretation appear to be again prophetically acting out John's message. This is also about the time when John the Baptist, imprisoned in Herod's jail, sent some of his disciples with that most urgent of questions for Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Thus, it is no wonder that the Fourth Gospel then records that "When the people saw the sign that (Jesus) had done (with the Feeding of the Five Thousand), they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet (that John the Baptist had said) is to come into the world.' But when Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, (that is to anoint him, make him a Messiah) Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself" (Jn. 6.14-5).

The next morning the crowd came looking for (Jesus again) and they found him teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

Thereafter begins this long discourse which is the topic of the Gospel lessons for these five weeks in a row. Now what exactly was said in this long discourse is difficult to say. The author of the Fourth Gospel has created much of this dialogue himself, as he has done elsewhere, to try and explain to his readers who Jesus is, but it is clear that by the end of this long conversation, Jesus' followers were murmuring against him, and Jesus knowing this, said to them, 'Do you take offense at this?' . . . And after this many of (Jesus') disciples," we are told, "drew back and no longer went about with him, such that Jesus (then turned to the twelve apostles) and said, 'Do you also wish to go away?'"

Thus, within a very short period of time, it seems a large group who had followed Jesus from Jerusalem, where he had performed prophetically, and after which he healed the sick impressively, those who had been miraculously fed by him on the hillside now took offense at him, drew back, and no longer went about with him. They simply turned and walked away. They forsook Jesus. The mass abandonment of Jesus at Capernaum was so widespread that Jesus himself turned to his own chosen twelve disciples to see whether they were going to leave him too. And in a few weeks time, Jesus will retreat to Caesarea Philippi, where he asks his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?"

What exactly did Jesus say in this long dialogue at Capernaum to turn away so many of his followers? What was so 'hard' about his teaching that they abandoned him? That is difficult to say. But when the crowd first caught up with Jesus the morning after the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus said to them as we saw last week, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." This suggests that they had followed Jesus because he had filled their empty stomachs. They were hungry and he fed them. They were sick and he healed them. They were in Jerusalem, and he inspired them. That's why they were there. The rest of the long discourse must be understood in that context, in reference to the cleansing of the Temple, the healing of the sick, and the feeding of the five thousand. But as soon as Jesus starts talking theology, as soon as he starts defining who he is or what his mission is, in whatever words he used, the crowds turn away. The crowd murmured at him, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he say these things?"

I am reminded here of Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamozov*. *The Brothers Karamazov* tells the story of the three brothers: Alyosha who is a novice at a local Russian monastery, Ivan who is a non-believer and Dmitry who is a soldier. The most renowned chapter in that novel is entitled "The Grand

Inquisitor," and is a passage so popular that it has often been published separately, as a small book in its own right, and is one of the best-known stories in modern literature because of its ideas about human nature and freedom.

The Grand Inquisitor chapter is a parable told by Ivan to entertain his brother Alyosha. In his story, Jesus comes back to earth to Seville, Spain, in the sixteenth century at the height of the Spanish Inquisition. "(Jesus) came softly, unobserved, and yet, strange to say, everyone recognized Him," declared Ivan. "The people are irresistibly drawn to Him, they surround Him, they flock about Him, follow Him. He moves silently in their midst with a gentle smile of infinite compassion." Jesus then performs a number of miracles (echoing miracles from the Gospels). He heals a blind man, where scales fall from his eyes, children then throw flowers at Jesus' feet and cry out 'Hosanna', and then Jesus raises from the dead a child of seven, on the very steps of the grand Cathedral of Seville. The Grand Inquisitor himself passes by and observes this event from a distance, frowns, and immediately has Jesus arrested and sentenced to be burnt to death at the stake the next day.

That night, the Grand Inquisitor comes to visit Jesus in his prison cell, and this dialogue is the heart of the story, as the Grand Inquisitor explains to Jesus why his return now would simply interfere with the mission of the Church. The Grand

Inquisitor reproaches Jesus for making all the wrong choices back there in the desert when he was tempted by the devil. When Jesus was hungry, for instance, he should have turned the stones to bread, says the Grand Inquisitor, for humanity *does* live by bread alone. That's what the people are interested in, that's what they want. Fill their stomachs, heal their infirmities, comfort their sorrows, attend to their base and physical human needs. Give them what they want, and they will follow you anywhere, he says. They will make you king. But if you do not give them what they want, says the Grand Inquisitor, then they will forsake you.

This long discourse in the Fourth Gospel seems to be saying much the same thing, that we often follow Jesus simply because we are hungry, or because we are hurt, or needy in some other way. That we want spectacle, and bread, and prerogative. There are three powers, three powers alone, the Inquisitor suggests, that are able to conquer and to hold captive forever the conscience of these weak human beings, able to provide for their happiness, able to secure their love. These three powers are miracle, mystery and authority. "When the Inquisitor ceased speaking he waited some time for his Prisoner to answer him. His silence weighed down upon him. He saw that the Prisoner had listened intently all the time, looking gently in his face and evidently not wishing to reply. The old man longed for him to

say something, however bitter and terrible. But Jesus only rose and approached the old man in silence and softly kissed him on his cold and lifeless lips. That was all his answer. The old man shuddered. His lips moved. He went to the prison door, opened it, and said to Jesus: 'Go, and come no more... come not at all, never, never!' And he let Him out into the dark alleys of the town. And the Prisoner went away."

In Dostoevsky's novel, Jesus has no real answer to the Grand Inquisitor's charges. In the Gospel, however, I think, Jesus answers more decisively. For we must always remember that when the crowd from Jerusalem gathered with Jesus on the hillside, that Jesus *did* indeed feed them, that he did indeed heal the sick and did attend to their basic human needs and hungers, as he does to ours. And if they followed him the next day because of it, well, as he says in the midst of that long discourse, "All that the Father gives me will come to me; and anyone who comes to me I will in no way cast out.'" (Jn. 6.37) In the end, Jesus accepts us for who we are, even as weak human beings seeking bread and healing and mystery. Jesus accepts us for who we are, even if when we cannot or do not always agree with how to describe him or his mission, when theology gets in the way of our following him, and doing what he asks of us. The crowd walked away from Jesus. Jesus did not walk away from them, and neither must we. AMEN.