

Pentecost 8  
26/7/2009

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 11:1-15

Psalm 14

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 6:1 – 21

### A great deal of green grass

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The Gospel of John is so full of meaning the temptation is to read it and leave a generous silence for reflection. At the same time this familiar story is brim full of coded and symbolic references that cry out for interpretation. One of the keys is found half way through in verse 10: “*Now there was a great deal of grass in that place; so they sat down.*” This clue is meant to turn our minds to first verses of Psalm 23 “*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, he makes me lie down in green pastures.*” The scene where Jesus feeds the people beside the lake is meant to be read as an episode in the life of Israel when Lord, their shepherd, cared for them in their need, an image derived especially from the days of the Exodus. This is underlined when John tells us: “*The Passover was drawing near*”. (v 5) The Passover sets the theological agenda in this story. It is the feast connected with God’s gifts of freedom and providence in the Exodus, and the foundation for the Eucharistic feast. When Jesus goes up the mountain with the disciples before he fed the people, the reference is to Moses, and the prophets such as Elijah and Elisha, who experienced God on the holy mountain and were sustained on their journeys in the desert. And when we read Jesus joined his troubled disciples in the boat and *immediately they came to land*, there is a clear association with Israel’s passing through the Red Sea, on dry land. The power of the God of Heaven and Earth is at work to save and protect the flock.

In the Wilderness the people struggled to understand their journey under God’s leadership. The same dynamic of “little faith” is reflected in the crowds who followed Jesus “*only because of his signs*”, and in Philip’s response to Jesus’ question: “*six month’s wages would not be enough to feed them a little*”. Although the disciples and the hungry crowd saw something in Jesus they had not yet grasped the deeper meaning of his life.

The feeding of the 5000 has direct references to the manna in the desert, and it anticipates the Last Supper, the foundation of the Eucharist. Jesus *takes* the bread, *gives thanks* over it (*eucharisto*) and *gives it* to those who were gathered. The order: *take, bless, broke and gave*, based on the Last Supper, has become the pattern for Eucharistic practice, a sign of who Jesus is, and a revelation of the deeper meaning of his pattern of self-giving.

This Gospel makes a link between Jesus as shepherd and kingship. The people are enthused over Jesus and want to make him king but he flees. He is David's heir, but the crowd's misplaced intentions are not for him. And it is here there are links with Jesus' temptation in the desert. He refuses the plan to give him a royal role and have the world at his feet. Although in some ways he has made bread out of stones, he will emerge as a different sort of king. At the coming Passover he who feeds bodies and nourishes the souls of the people, will embody what it means to live in the sovereignty of God. In the mean time he leaves us some clues.

There could hardly be a sharper contrast between Jesus and the picture of David we see today. David and Bathsheba is hard to embrace but the wonder of the history of faith is that God guards the continuity promised to David and translates it into a new code through his line. Not through the seductions of power, or of sword, or political intrigue, but by self-giving service does God seek to resolve the past and offer us a future in which we are nurtured by the bread of life. Where David exploited Bathsheba for his own ends, Jesus gave women, the poor and outsiders, the dignity of respect and place, showing that the covenant God made with the world extends to all, regardless of sex, gender or status. Where David killed the poor man in order to steal his wife, Jesus takes the humble food of the poor, barley loaves and fish, and feeds the people until they are satisfied. And whereas spring is the season when kings make war, Jesus makes it the season of verdant pastures where the Good Shepherd feeds the sheep. He preached that the reign of God was at hand, but this did not equate with hierarchy, patriarchy or sexism, or with him claiming glory for himself. And when he was put on trial and the people shouted they had no king but Caesar, he reminded Pilate where the real power came from. He was not conquered by the power of death. Instead, by entering into it fully, he conquered death's power over us.

*"The Fool says in his heart there is no God"*. According to the Psalmist, the real folly is to close the mind entirely to the possibility of God. It is difficult for us because God is something other than what we expect. This is made as clear as possible at the end of John's Gospel where the Resurrection becomes the sign that all that God is is beyond knowing, and the worst we could do did not eradicate God's commitment to us. There is no shadow dark enough to keep us from the light, which is why we continue to retell and celebrate these stories.

Gathered here as we are, we stand for the fact that the way to life is found by living according to a different sovereignty from the one people usually prefer. One which in manner of life and response overturns every notion of what it means to be truly human. We come here to feed our hearts and minds on the stories of grace and humility given to us in the one who gave the world the bread of life. And here, in repentance, we acknowledge how easily we are seduced - by our desires, and the lies and deceit of those who reign today with duplicity and ruthlessness.

We continue to expose ourselves to these stories because what we have learned from Jesus is that his gifts surpass what can be provided from human resources: in him the world has been given an inexhaustible source of nourishment. This translates in to meaning that at this table we are served with the imperishable promise of life with God. On this deep and permanent offer of grace we are called to feed, and live.

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