

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson

Sunday 25th July 2021 - 17th Sunday in ordinary time

Readings (Year B): 1st: 2 Kings 4:42-44. Psalm: 144. 2nd: Ephesians 4:1-6. Gospel: John 6:1-15.

Pictures and scenes of supermarket empty shelves have appeared in the last few days. People therefore are being urged not to panic buy. None of us will starve or even need to go hungry.

Bible Alive for today reminds us that in the desert the devil tempted Jesus to display his power and turn stones into bread to alleviate his hunger. Jesus dismissed his tempter, quoting Deuteronomy 8: 3 ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but by everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord.’ While it is true that we do not live on bread alone, hunger bites deep and it is hard, as we hear in today’s gospel of the feeding of the 5000.

When we are hungry, we can think of little else. Jesus moved with compassion, catered for everyone’s need – relieving their hunger. This miracle is the only one of its type recorded by all four evangelists.

For the next few Sundays we move from Mark to John for the gospel. Last Sunday our journey with Mark reached the stage where Jesus was fulfilling his role as the Good Shepherd leading back a lost people, and ‘he set himself to teach them at some length.’ Immediately after that, Mark shows Jesus as the shepherd feeding his flock in the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.

The liturgy of the bread follows the liturgy of teaching. The Table of the Word and the Table of the Sacrament, at every Mass. The Church gives us John’s version of this miracle, called in John a sign, which he develops into a deep theological reflection. John has meditated deeply on the significance of this sign. He intends us to see the clear link between this action and the Last Supper, by referring to the same time-setting ‘shortly before the Jewish feast of Passover.’

Passover as we know was the greatest feast of the Jewish year, commemorating especially the Exodus, the journey with Moses through the Red Sea on their journey from slavery to freedom. On the way they were

fed with the manna, bread from heaven. This sign took place near a hill, recalling Mount Sinai where Moses met with God. Only in John do we get the question put to Philip by Jesus “where can we buy some bread” very similar to a question put by Moses to God, which says ‘the people round me number 600,000 and you say I shall give them meat to eat.’ (Num 11:22) The people sensed this parallel with Moses, but mistakenly interpret it according to their own desires.

Mistaken interpretations are often used by John as a device to enable Jesus to reiterate his teaching, which will be unfolded by John in the next few week’s gospels from his chapter 6. This mistaken understanding represents worldly or natural thinking, whereas Jesus teaches a meaning which only faith can comprehend. It involves rising from the material world to the spiritual.

In this instance the people recognised in Jesus the prophet beyond all prophets, as promised by Moses. They invested the idea with their own strong hopes for a nationalistic messiah, a king who would lead them to freedom from the Roman domination, just as Moses had freed them from the Egyptian yoke. At the time the only way out of this misunderstanding for Jesus was to escape to the hills by himself.

As John reflects, his mind reaches ahead to another Passover celebration when Jesus knew that the time had come for him to pass from this world to the Father. The Last Supper took place in the context of the Passover meal. John does not in his gospel tell of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. As all the other gospel writers do, it was a given.

The actions in the sign of today’s gospel anticipate the Eucharist. One writer on this chapter says” John writes like the skylark rising in song over the one area. He might start with some natural matter like water, wind, bread, wine, but then he rises in song up to the supernatural level.”

In this chapter he has begun with physical hunger and bread for the body. But over the next four weeks John will raise our thoughts up to the supernatural level of faith in Jesus and in the bread of life.

Canon Philip Dyson