

## 2021-08-01 - John 6:1-24 – what kind of king?

6 Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), 2 and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. 3 Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. 4 The Jewish Passover Festival was near.

5 When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” 6 He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

7 Philip answered him, “It would take more than half a year’s wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”

8 Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, 9 “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”

10 Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). 11 Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

12 When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” 13 So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

14 After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.” 15 Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, 17 where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. 18 A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. 19 When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened. 20 But he said to them, “It is I; don’t be afraid.” 21 Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

22 The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone. 23 Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. 24 Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus.

Today's reading is a familiar story and it is easy when we hear it to have the familiar thoughts about it – maybe that it is a demonstration of Jesus' concern for people in need, or of his amazing power, or of his ability to take our meagre human offerings and multiply them into something remarkable. And those are all important and true. But as those in the crowds were challenged to see beyond the obvious and be challenged in their presuppositions, so are we. A common theme in John's gospel is that of truth, of spiritual illumination and of having eyes opened to see spiritual realities beyond the obvious, so we should be open to challenge, to seeing things in a new way.

So what else might this be about? What might God be saying to us today? John throws in a little clue in the very first verse, tucked away in a parenthesis. All four gospels write about this incident, but where the others refer to it as being located near the Sea of Galilee, John specifies the name that became popular in the later first century, the 'Sea of Tiberias'. This designation serves to shift our attention towards this as a region occupied by a foreign power and the place of power struggles between kings.

The episodes in our reading are located in the real world, in a place that can be visited, and a time that can be dated (around the time of Passover, as it happens, which corresponds with a detail in the other gospel accounts that there was green grass around). It also involves real people with names, such as Greek-speaking Philip who elsewhere (Jn 6:5) is identified as coming from this area of Bethsaida, and Andrew, who is also from this same area. Philip's focus is on the human, financial impossibility of feeding all these people, and is in line with our theme – of seeing humanly, rather than with spiritual sight.

Andrew, a problem-solver and 'people person' according to other references in the gospels, is more proactive than Philip, and in trying to find supplies, identifies a boy with five barley loaves (harder than wheat loaves that wealthier people would have had) and two 'opsarion' (not whole fish which would be 'ichthus' in the Greek, but parts of fish, titbits, possibly preserved). It is a very meagre offering from the hands of a young boy, but Jesus acknowledges its real provenance and the real provider – God. And here the focus shifts from earthly things to heavenly. According to the other gospel accounts, Jesus lift his eyes up, and he then give thanks.

Having been fed, the people are satisfied – this point is accentuated by repetition: 'as much as they wanted... they had eaten their fill... left by those who had eaten'. And with much left over, nothing is to be wasted. Now this not just an economic principle of sound stewardship – an important principle for any time that reaches back to our commission in Genesis to care for the earth, and especially relevant today as we see the effects on our natural environment of our irresponsibility and greed. It is a reference back to God's people, symbolically gathered in this story. Later in John's gospel (Jn 17:12, 18:9), Jesus says that he will lose none that have been given to him by the Father – none will be lost. This large crowd of many thousands, sitting together, enjoying a feast is a picture of the kingdom of God – the people of God; all are drawn in and provided for. They are gathered around the King who provides for his people.

The picture – and timing, being near to the Passover – is reminiscent of a key moment in the history of God’s people. Crossing the water, arriving in the wilderness, organising the people into companies, sharing bread, having more than enough, and gathering what is left, reminds us of the provision of manna in the desert under the leadership of Moses, following the journey of God’s people out of enslavement to the cruel Pharaohs of Egypt, to be established as a Kingdom cared for and protected by Yahweh, the Shepherd-King. And Jesus is the new and greater Moses. Jesus is the King.

But the people have different ideas of the Prophet who is to come into the world that Moses had foretold (Ex 18). They intend to make Jesus king by force. Beside the Sea of Tiberias – named after the one-time absolute ruler of the known world – they had in mind a king very much in the mould of earthly leaders.

Having filled their stomachs, the minds of the people seem to be fixed on earthly things – a ruler to compete with and displace the powers of the day. Having resisted the temptation of Satan to take this path, the crowd are minded to make the one who can heal their sicknesses and fill their stomachs their king by force. It is a dangerous situation, both spiritually and politically. If there was any hint of an uprising against the cruel overlords, the Romans would quickly step in – and have no qualms about using their legendary brutality - to crush any chance of any challenge to their dominance. Jesus is aware of the danger and withdraws from the situation, sending his disciples on ahead of him.

But Jesus is delayed in joining them. Who knows what he was doing. Perhaps he was praying, perhaps he was in conversation, maybe he was simply exhausted and so sleeping! But the disciples set out across the lake, and as they do so, a fierce storm springs up, as can easily happen in that part of the world.

The human dangers of the world are now compounded by those of the natural world. But their fear of the natural terror is overshadowed by a vision of a human figure walking towards them across the stormy waters. His words to them not to be afraid include the phrase that we lose a bit in translation, but what we have as “It is I” translates the Greek phrase elsewhere translated simply “I am”, echoing the name of God revealed to Moses in Ex 3:14. The walking on water coupled with these words make it clear that Jesus is claiming divinity. And having taken Jesus aboard, they immediately reached their destination.

The disciples must have thought they were dreaming – or perhaps in the midst of a nightmare. In a small boat in a stormy sea at night, things turn surreal. What happens are not normal, earthly events; it is not the exercise of the power of even the most powerful human king. Jesus is clearly radically different to the sort of military hero like David or brilliant administrator like Solomon who rescues from human enemies and supplies human needs. Jesus is the heavenly king whose kingdom is not of - or more literally from - this world, as Jesus later says in John 18:36. The kingdom of Jesus is this-worldly enough – after all, he has just fed a crowd! But his authority does not derive either from the will of the people or from political power plays. Jesus’ authority comes from God himself.

The people continue to search for Jesus, looking for the one who can fill their stomachs and meet their earthly needs, to make Jesus the kind of king that they want. But Jesus is a different type of King altogether, who goes on to explain – and we will think about next week – that the food he provides is the food of himself, which gives life not just for the here and now, but for eternity; it is the food that truly satisfies.

We can easily fall into the trap of treating Jesus like the people did – not just the supplier of our short-term, earthly needs, but having an attitude that is more subtle and more dangerous. Yes, Jesus teaches us to ask God for our daily bread – that our daily needs are met – but in the Lord's Prayer, this request is after a prayer that God would be honoured and God's heavenly kingdom come to earth. It is very easy to approach Jesus and God much like a magic genie, whose role is to do our bidding, to be our servant whilst we are the master. We may well ask for worthy things to ask for, and our motivation can often be good (or at least partly good), but we can easily fall into the trap of saying, in essence, "*my* will be done" instead of "*thy* will be done". We are not ultimately allowing God to be king in our lives and we the servants; it is the other way round. Of course we have minds that plan, and the strength and resources to achieve certain things, but we need to approach every situation and decision with humility before God, who is ultimately sovereign, and whose will *will* be done! We need to align our wills to his, to desire what he desires, to become more like Jesus in the renewing of our minds. Our priorities need to be Kingdom priorities, and then all the other things that are needful for humans shall be given to us. Following God's ways - and eating of the bread of life that is Jesus - is the way to ultimate

human fulfilment and satisfaction and of eternal life – of life with and in perfect harmony with God.

Jesus' disciples were rocked not just the waves on the Sea of Tiberias – that is the Sea of Galilee. In a relatively short space of time, there were other waves they had to ride: the practical crisis of a hungry crowd and a food shortage, the miraculous provision of an abundance of food, a satisfied crowd whose mood quickly changes, a hasty retreat across the lake which almost ends in disaster, and a miraculous rescue by Jesus who calmly comes to them in their crisis, and brings them to safety.

Jesus does not promise his us a smooth ride – far from it. But he does promise to provide for the needs of his people – physical and spiritual - and not lose any of those that the Father has given to him. We may be tempted to force Jesus to be the kind of king that *we* want him to be, but we should instead allow the King of Love who has poured out himself for his people to have his loving rule in our lives. Jesus is the true King, whose presence – the presence of God himself – supplies all our needs, quietens the storm, and brings us to our final destination.