

Gospel

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Context

There are two contexts for this week's Gospel: (1) the liturgical sequence of Year B's readings in which the Gospels are primarily drawn from the *Gospel according to Mark*, and (2) the scriptural setting of the *Gospel according to John*. There is a high degree of overlap, but then again, each sacred writer has his own emphasis, a different way of telling the larger story of Jesus, and a distinctive lexicon of language.

The Liturgical Context. Most recently in Liturgical Year B we have been reading from Mark chapters 4 through 6. In those chapters Jesus calmed the storm at sea (4:35-51), healed the woman with the hemorrhage and raised Jairus' daughter from death (5:21-43), returned to his home town to be rejected (6:1-6), sent the apostles out on mission in his power and authority (6:7-13), and then received them at the end of the mission and intended to take them to rest (6:30-34). The Markan narrative next recounts the miraculous feeding of more than 5,000 people. Mark recounts the miracle in 10 verses, sparsely worded, and to the point. It is at this point in the liturgical cycle that we turn to John and his account of the event of the sign given in the "Bread of Life Discourse." The Johannine narrative recounts more of the people's reaction to the sign, is more expansive in Jesus' explanation of the sign, and seems to be intended to explain the theological and Christological significance of Jesus' action. All of this is as you might expect for a gospel written some 20-30 years after Mark's narrative.

The Scriptural Context. John 6 marks the beginning of a new section in the Fourth Gospel narrative. In 2:1-5:47 there was a cycle which includes the revelation of Jesus' glory and the rejection of that glory. These chapters contain miracles and discourses by Jesus that point to the authority of Jesus' words and works—the wine miracle at Cana (2:1-11); the cleansing of the Temple (2:13-22); two healing miracles (4:46-54; 5:1-9); Jesus' conversations with Nicodemus (3:1-21) and the Samaritan woman (4:4-42)—and so fulfill his promise to his disciples that they would see "greater things" (1:50). Yet this cycle also contains the first story of Jesus' conflict with the Jewish authorities (5:9-47), a conflict that includes the decision to kill Jesus (5:18). This first cycle establishes the themes and tensions that characterize Jesus' public ministry in John—from the manifestation of Jesus' glory (2:1-11) to the rejection of that glory (5:9-47).

The second cycle of Jesus' public ministry follows the same pattern as the first—it begins with a miracle in Galilee, the feeding of the five thousand (6:1–15), and concludes with hostility to Jesus and renewed intention to kill him (10:31–39). The difference between the two cycles is that the urgency of that question is highlighted as the hostility to Jesus increases. There are no new theological themes introduced, instead the same themes are replayed in a new context: Jesus' authority and relationship to God, Jesus' ability to give life and judge, the consequences of faith or unbelief. [O'Day, 519] And, as you might imagine, the antagonism in response to Jesus' words and deeds only grows. The second cycle poses the same basic question as the first: Will people receive the revelation of God in Jesus?

For the this and the following four Sundays our gospel is taken from John 6. So, perhaps it is best to see what lays ahead:

John 6 follows the same basic pattern noted in chapter 5: miracle/dialogue/discourse. This pattern is more intricate in John 6 because the chapter narrates Jesus' self-revelation to two groups: the crowd and his disciples. As such John 6 contains two miracles: one performed before the crowd and the disciples (6:1–15) and one performed in front of the disciples alone (6:16–21). This dual focus is reflected in the discourse material as well. John 6 can be outlined as follows:

Verses	Sunday	Content
6:1–15	17 th	Miracle (with crowd)
6:16–21		Miracle (with disciples alone) – miracle at sea <i>cf.</i> Mark 4:34 and following
6:22–24		Transition
6:25–34	18 th	Dialogue (crowd)
6:35–59	19 th / 20 th	Discourse (crowd and disciples)
6:60–71	21 st	Conclusion (disciples alone)

Commentary

This chapter begins the second major ministry section in John (6:1-10:42). There are similarities to the beginning of the first major ministry section (2:1-5:47). O'Day [591] suggests: "It is probably no accident that the two inaugural miracles involve wine and bread, the sacramental symbols of God's grace in Jesus." Both sections start with miracles in Galilee that show God's abundant grace and Jesus' divine glory:

- In 2:1-11, Jesus turns a whole lot of water into an abundance of wine, which is "the first of his signs," in which "revealed his glory" (2:11)
- In 6:1-15, Jesus turns five loaves and two fish into an abundance of food for thousands. This is followed by 6:16-21, Jesus walking on the water, which is primarily a theophany -- an occasion where Jesus' divine glory is revealed.

Differing Accounts. The story of the miraculous feeding occupied a central place in the oral tradition about Jesus – it is the only miracle story found in all four gospels. (Matthew and Mark also include the feeding of the 4,000.) The pivotal place of this miraculous feeding occupies a central place in all the gospel traditions. The accounts are not the same there are unique features, omissions, additions, and parallels. Yet the central placement of the story means it is not necessary to conjecture if John relied upon others for the recalling of the story. Fr. Raymond Brown [239], after a detailed study of the all the accounts, concludes about John's account: "There is one logical explanation for all of these features, omissions, additions, and parallels, namely, that the evangelist did not copy from the

Synoptics but had an independent tradition of the multiplication which was like, but not the same as, the Synoptic traditions.” The difference, as well as the similarities, can be accounted for in John’s perspective. Seeing all the other gospels had written the factual account of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, John had set out to write the theological gospel according to Clement of Alexandria (ca. 200 AD). Such a perspective will naturally capture more the intent of the dialog as is the natural inclination of the theological undertaking.

The Setting. ¹*After this, Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee (of Tiberias).* ²*A large crowd followed him, because they saw the signs he was performing on the sick.* ³*Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples.* ⁴*The Jewish feast of Passover was near.*

While short in length, each verse of the introduction contributes something significant to the narrative that follows: the location at the Sea of Galilee (v.1), the theme of seeing signs (v.2), the distinction between the followers and the crowd (v.3), and Passover (v.4). These simple verses almost act as a pause, asking the reader to reflect upon what has come before.

Consider the crowd’s response in 2:23–25 (Jesus doing other signs during Passover) and to the healing in 5:1–9 (on the Sabbath) in which great signs were done and yet not all believed. Such will be the same in John 6. As noted earlier in this commentary, Jesus’ self-revelation is to two groups: the crowd and his disciples. This pattern will repeat in John 6. Jesus’ retreat to the mountain with his disciples in v. 3 sets up the contrast between Jesus’ self-revelation to his disciples and to the crowd. The reference to Passover in v. 4 introduces the exodus theme; exodus imagery figures prominently in vv. 5–59 (e.g., vv. 12, 31–32, 49, 58).

Before the Miracle. ⁵*When Jesus raised his eyes and saw that a large crowd was coming to him, he said to Philip, “Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?”* ⁶*He said this to test him, because he himself knew what he was going to do.* ⁷*Philip answered him, “Two hundred days’ wages worth of food would not be enough for each of them to have a little (bit).”* ⁸*One of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him,* ⁹*“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?”*

The miracle is initiated by Jesus. Just as Jesus initiated contact with the Samaritan woman (4:9) and initiated the healing of the man by the pool (5:6), so also here he anticipates the hunger of the crowd. His question, “*Where can we buy enough food?*” is a different question from “How can we provide enough food?”

Philip was the natural person to ask where food might be found to feed them all, for he was a native of nearby Bethsaida (1:44). Perhaps Philip’s answer would have been the same, but the latter question might have helped Philip focus on what is one of the central christological questions in John’s gospel: the source of Jesus’ gifts. If one knows the source of the gifts, one is closer to recognizing Jesus’ identity (consider 4:10). But as Philip and Andrew (also from Bethsaida) point out, in the natural course of things, there is no way that everyone can have enough; in the natural course of things.

As an aside, one wonders if that same dynamic is in place in our time when people offer the answer to the question as a “miracle” took place in people’s hearts. In such thinking, Christ induced the selfish to share their provisions, and when this was done there proved to be more than enough for them all. As Morris [300] notes, such a view relies “too much on presupposition and [overlooks] what the writers actually say. It is much better, accordingly, to hold ... the view, that Jesus, the Son of God incarnate, did do something that we can describe only as miracle.” That said, let us return to the commentary.

Jesus knows the answer to the question—he knows what he is going to do—and he discovers that his disciples are unable to answer his question. Instead of seeing that Jesus’ question is about himself, the

two disciples interpret the question on the most earthly level and so give earthly answers: There is neither money nor food enough to feed so many people.

O'Day point out [594] that this “exchange between Jesus and his disciples prepares for the miracle in several ways. Philip’s and Andrew’s responses communicate how daunting the size of the crowd is and hence the huge quantity of food that would be required to feed them. More important, the disciples’ answers show how traditional categories cannot comprehend in advance what Jesus has to give. Conventional expectations offer no solutions to the crowd’s needs; Jesus alone knows how to meet those needs.”

The Miracle. ¹⁰ *Jesus said, “Have the people recline.” Now there was a great deal of grass in that place. So the men reclined, about five thousand in number.* ¹¹ *Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were reclining, and also as much of the fish as they wanted.*

One should note that the account indicates there are 5,000 men – so if one assumes women and children present, not an unwarranted assumption, then are a great deal more than 5,000 people present.

Verse 10 narrates an element standard to all of the accounts of the feeding: the order for the crowd to recline/sit down (Matt 14:19; 15:35; Mark 6:39; 8:6; Luke 9:14). In the miracle itself, Jesus’ actions do not reflect the more liturgically stylized actions of the synoptic accounts (e.g., Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16 – “*looking up to heaven*”), but rather reflect the actions of a host at a Jewish meal (although Liturgy has its foundation in the Jewish meal). Jesus takes the food, gives thanks over it (*eucharistēsas*), and gives it to his “guests.” Importantly, the Fourth Evangelist narrates Jesus’ distributing the bread and fish himself, in contrast to the synoptic accounts, where the disciples distribute the food (e.g., Matt 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16). Jesus’ distribution of the food enhances the christological focus of this miracle: The gift of food comes from Jesus himself.

Miracle’s Aftermath. ¹² *When they had had their fill, he said to his disciples, “Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted.”* ¹³ *So they collected them, and filled twelve wicker baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves that had been more than they could eat.* ¹⁴ *When the people saw the sign he had done, they said, “This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world.”* ¹⁵ *Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone.*

The gathering of twelve baskets full of fragments is common to the other accounts (Matt 14:20; Mark 6:43; Luke 9:17) and serves to emphasize the enormity of the miracle; not only did the people eat their fill, but there were leftovers as well (cf. 2:6; 4:13–14). (Seven baskets of fragments are collected in Matt 15:37 and Mark 8:8). Jesus’ words (v.12) are unique to the Johannine version of the miracle and make an important connection between this story and the manna story of Exodus 16. In Exod 16:19, Moses asked that the people not leave any extra manna around, but the people disobeyed Moses and the leftover manna “bred worms and became foul” (Exod 16:20). Jesus’ words in 6:12 seem to caution against a repetition of Exodus 16. The connection between the feeding miracle and the manna story, so pivotal to 6:25–59, is thus introduced early on.

Verses 14 and 15 narrate the results of the miracle. The Fourth Gospel narrative has taught the reader to suspect any response to Jesus that is based on a surface reaction to signs (2:23–25; 4:48). The people’s confession of Jesus as “*the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world*” (v. 14; cf. 4:25) is, therefore, ambiguous, because while it is an appropriate confession (cf. 4:19; 9:17), it rests on the evidence of signs. In addition, the people also miss the christological reference point of the sign/miracle. It pointed people to God. But these folk saw only a reference to a prophet. Admittedly the prophet that they assumed would be the greatest of them all, namely the one foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15, the great prophet-like-Moses. Morris [306] holds that it is “somewhat curious that they thought of this prophet rather than the Messiah, unless, contrary to usual Jewish opinion, they thought of this

prophet as the Messiah. But perhaps this is part of the confused state of mind of so many at that time. Various ideas about the Messiah were current, and various prophets were expected, some being linked with nationalist, militarist views.”

It is perhaps these fierce nationalist tendencies which provided the opportunity (v.15) for Jesus to display his omniscience (cf. 1:48; 2:23–25; 4:16–18) by knowing in advance the crowd’s intent. The people’s desire to make Jesus king by force resolves the ambiguity of v.14 and confirms that the people’s response cannot be trusted. The kingship of Jesus is an important theme in the Fourth Gospel, first introduced in 1:49. Israel’s desire for a king is part of its messianic expectations, the hope for a second David. Jesus will be “king” in the Fourth Gospel, but he will be king according to his definition of kingship (18:36–38), not forced to fit the world’s sense of the natural order. The kingship theme reaches its resolution in the crucifixion narrative of John 18–19.

Reflection

As noted in the *Context* section, our verses are followed by the Johannine account of Jesus walking on the water and calming the seas (John 6:16–21). Whereas the miraculous feeding miracle was performed before the crowds, this miracle is with the disciples alone. It is with that context that I offer Gail O’Day’s reflection [597–98].

The two miracles of John 6:1–15 and 16–21 present the interpreter with two vivid enactments of the revelation of God’s grace and glory in Jesus. On the one hand, this grace and glory are revealed outside conventional human experience and expectations—in the miraculous feeding of over five thousand people with five loaves and two fish; in Jesus’ miraculous walking on water. On the other hand, the occasions where Jesus’ grace is offered and his glory revealed are familiar occasions of human need—the need for food, the need for safety and rescue from danger. The fears and needs that Jesus’ miracles meet belong to the common fund of human experience.

As in the healing of 4:46–54, Jesus’ grace is not revealed in a “spiritual” gift, but in a tangible, physical gift. A hungry crowd sat on the grass and ate bread and fish. Their spiritual needs were not the presenting problem for Jesus; their physical needs were (6:5). The interpreter, therefore, needs to be careful lest he or she adopt a purely symbolic interpretation of John 6:1–15 and cast its corporeality aside. The miraculous feeding dramatically demonstrates that Jesus has gifts and resources to meet the full range of human needs. He supplies the daily bread that people need to sustain life (cf. Matt 6:11; Luke 11:3). The feeding of the crowd thus confirms that Jesus is the source of life (cf. 6:33, 35, 58).

Jesus’ feeding miracle so impresses the crowd that they declare him to be a prophet (6:14) and intend to make him king (6:15). The crowd’s reaction shows how difficult it is to receive Jesus’ gifts on his terms without translating them immediately into one’s own categories. Jesus’ gift of food, the offer of his grace, provided the crowd with a glimpse of his identity, but they immediately tried to twist that identity to serve their own purposes. To make Jesus king is to take his grace and twist it to conform to pre-existent systems of power and authority. To make Jesus king is to judge him according to human glory (5:44) rather than to see in him God’s glory. When Jesus withdrew from the crowd (6:15), he showed that he would offer his gift of grace without claiming worldly power. In that moment his glory was revealed, because true glory has nothing to do with worldly power. In John 6:1–15, Jesus’ gift of grace thus becomes the vehicle for the revelation of his glory.

In John 6:16–21, by contrast, the revelation of Jesus’ glory is the vehicle for his gift of grace. If the crowd’s intention to make Jesus king distorts Jesus’ glory, then Jesus’ walking on water and his words to his disciples (“I am; do not fear”) counterbalance that distortion with

a true picture of his glory. In 6:16–21, Jesus reveals himself to his disciples as one with God, sharing in God’s actions (e.g., Job 9:8; Isa 43:2), identifying himself with God’s name (e.g., Isa 43:25), speaking God’s words. Yet this manifestation of the divine in Jesus is not bravura, not a moment of glory for the sake of glory, but a moment of glory for the sake of grace. Jesus reveals himself to his disciples in order to allay their fears, to ensure their safe passage, to remind them that God has been, is, and will be their rescue. Jesus’ glory is not revealed for power, but for grace-filled pastoral care.

These two miracle stories raise important questions about the balance between grace and glory. In 6:1–15, the heart of the story is Jesus’ grace, Jesus’ extraordinary, unprecedented gift. Yet the crowd is intrigued by the possibilities of glory, and they want to force Jesus to be king. John 6:16–21 narrates the most dramatic self-revelation of Jesus to this point in the Gospel; yet it occurs in the solitude of his disciples’ fears. Jesus will not allow his grace to be controlled by the crowd’s desire for glory, and so he hides himself. But he will not hold back his glory from those in need, because this is his mission: to make God known (1:18). How believers hold the grace and glory of Jesus in balance is critical to the life of faith. The grace is destroyed if one tries to harness it for false power and authority, and the glory is lost if one does not recognize its presence in the quiet places of Jesus’ grace. Both the grace and the glory are essential to God’s revelation in Jesus: “*and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only son, full of grace and truth*” (1:14).

Notes

John 6:1–15 This story of the multiplication of the loaves is the fourth sign. It is the only miracle story found in all four gospels (occurring twice in John and Matthew). John differs on the roles of Philip and Andrew, the proximity of Passover (Jn 6:4), and the allusion to Elisha (see Jn 6:9).

John 6:1 (*of Tiberias*): the awkward apposition represents a later name of the Sea of Galilee. The later name is related to the major town, in fact, the capital of Herod Antipas’ kingdom, situated on the western shore of the Sea.

John 6:2 *they saw the sign he was performing.* Other characters have come to Jesus because of the signs he did (*cf.* 1:49–51, Nathanael; 3:1–11, Nicodemus; 4:16–26, the Samaritan woman)

John 6:3 *up on the mountain.* It is on up on the mountain that Moses received the Law (*cf.* Ex 19:20, 14:1–2; Isa 34:2–4)

John 6:4 *Passover was near.* Coming immediately after Jesus’ reinterpreting Sabbath theology and practice, this mention of Passover sets the theological perspective of what follows.

John 6:5 *When...he said:* Jesus takes the initiative. In the synoptic’s narrative, it is the disciples that do. It is this initiative that possibly pictured Jesus as (*cf.* Jn 6:14) the new Moses (*cf.* Nm 11:13).

John 6:5 “*Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?*” This is the question that Moses asks of YHWH in the desert (Nm 11:13), but Jesus’ concern was rhetorical. The question is meant to test the faith of the apostles to believe something greater than Moses was here with them.

John 6:6 *he himself knew what he was going to do.* This aside is a key to understanding the miracle story and the following discourse. Jesus knew (*ēdei*; pluperfect of *oida*, “to know”, thus Jesus’ knowing is ongoing) and is in control of all that is happening. ***He said this to test them:*** Likely the evangelist’s own comment; in this gospel Jesus is never portrayed as ignorant of anything.

John 6:7 *Two hundred days’ wages worth of food would not be enough...* This phrase echoes the

account of Elisha's feeding of 100 men in 2 Kings 4:42-44. **days' wages**: literally, "denarii"; a Roman denarius is a day's wage in Mt 20:2.

John 6:9 barley loaves: the food of the poor. Philo says of barley meal, "as a foodstuff it is of somewhat doubtful merit, suited for irrational animals and men in unhappy circumstances." There seems an allusion to the story of Elisha multiplying the barley bread in 2 Kgs 4:42-44.

John 6:10 people: There is a change from *tous anthrōpous* ("the people") to *oi andres* ("the men"). It is unlikely that only men sat, the women and children remaining standing.

grass: implies springtime, and therefore Passover. Five thousand: so Mk 6:39, 44 and parallels. The Markan *erēmos* (deserted place) most literally refers to an uninhabited place in contrast to *polis* = "a populated place," "city," "town." While sparseness of people and vegetation often go together in the Middle East, e.g., a desert region; this word centers more on the lack of population than the lack of vegetation. Hence, there is grass.

John 6:13 baskets: the word describes the typically Palestinian wicker basket, as in Mk 6:43 and parallels.

John 6:14 the Prophet: probably the prophet like Moses (cf. Jn 1:21). The one who is to come into the world: probably Elijah; cf. Mal 3:1; 4:5.

John 6:15 Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king. The Greek contains an almost violent word (*harpazein*) to indicate that the people were about to force their will upon Jesus to make him a secular, royal king.

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