

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

John chapter six

This eventful chapter is one of the most complex in the Bible, and repays the closest attention. We're reading it over the next five Sundays, and the Bulletin will try to open up some of its hidden depths.

Resonance

This chapter is a house full of echoes. Everything Jesus does or says resounds with memories and words from the past, as well as things of the future. We can find the great themes of human experience laid open: hunger and desire, hope and promise, the cry of the flesh for satisfaction and security, the words that are spirit and life. We meet all those who went out into the desert: Moses and his whole people, coming out of Egypt into the terrible heat and drought of Sinai: John the Baptist, a voice in the wilderness: the exiles, huddled together against the adversity and loss of their life. We can find *ourselves* here, like people who meet themselves in a dream, or come upon a surprisingly-sited full-length mirror. These are haunted passages of the human house.

“Shortly Before Passover...”

Does this mean the annual feast - or the great, final Passover which will see the death of Jesus? At once what happens here is placed in two mighty contexts: that of the dominant act of the Old Testament - God's liberation of his people from Egypt: and that of the climactic heart of human history, the Paschal exodus of Jesus through death to eternal life. Both modes of the Bible are thus made present for this miracle, the only one related by all four Gospels. Clearly we are in deep waters, and must have our wits about us as we enter into this story.

“Where Can We Buy Food For Them?”

The question still haunts the world, as its population smashes our economic thinking to smithereens, with impossible indulgence for a few, and grinding poverty for the millions. The sustaining of all this life is *our* duty, as rich nations who have plundered the world for ourselves, who have in our hands the tools of technology and the power of wealth. Poor Philip stands aghast at the question. So do we. *Two hundred denarii* is a year's wages, and it would hardly scratch the surface of the need. It was Moses' question to God in the book of Numbers: *If we killed*

all our flocks it would hardly suffice for one day. God asks Moses in return, *Is the arm of God so short?* We should ask ourselves the same question, as our earth groans under our suicidal selfishness. By contrast, there is a small boy with a tiny parcel of food. Suddenly we are joined by the prophet Elisha, from our first reading, who started out to feed the multitude with what little he had, and found it was sufficient. What could we not achieve for the hungry world, if we found the prophet who would inspire us with the hope and trust to make a beginning?

Twelve Baskets Left Over

The figure 12 evokes the full count of Israel's Twelve Tribes; it is as if Jesus has summoned them back into being and gathered them from the nations to which they were dispersed seven centuries before. It also evokes the Twelve Jesus summoned to be the foundation of his new people. These Twelve have a huge vocation to fulfil. Mysteriously Jesus is preparing them for the day when they must set out to feed the nations of the earth with the Gospel of life, making a new Israel out of the multitudes scattered after the Tower of Babel. Suddenly we find ourselves looking forward to the vast voyage of the Church through the history of the future: always suffering the same doubt and perplexity the apostles display, but always sustained by the Lord who *knew exactly what he was going to do*. What are those baskets of bread and fish, but the generous excess which symbolises all who will come after, seeking for food and safety, longing for the certainty which Jesus alone possesses?

They Wanted To Make A King Of Him

The response of the crowd is very positive, but very wrong, and Jesus has only one recourse - to beat it up into the mountains. It's the only time we see him running away. Obedience to Jesus can be wrong or right, earthly or heavenly. The Christ who will feed the world is the Christ of the Passion: his only throne will be his Cross. So, if we are to be healed with our world, it will not be by an exercise of earthly power, but by sacrificial love, obedient submission to the Father. *My kingdom is not of this world*; nothing which reeks of earthly power can be used in its founding. We have misunderstood: we have further to go.

Fr Philip