

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

He Began To Teach Them

Jesus and his disciples have crossed the sea of Galilee: they in their boat, struggling with a head wind: he effortlessly striding across the waves in the power of God. This crossing of water is emblematic. Crossing the Red Sea in Exodus was the act which divided Jew from Egyptian forever; it was really at that point that God set his chosen people free. And it was on that farther shore that they would come to Sinai, and forge their Covenant, with its divine gift of the Law which would mark out the People of God.

They Got Into Boats To Follow Him

The people who had misunderstood his sign of feeding now catch up. Their hopes are still very basic and earthbound: *free food* just about sums it up. But now Jesus is using words, and telling them that their sort of following is no use. Having crossed the water in bodily terms, they now need a spiritual transition too. What would it mean, for them truly to *see the sign*? Well, the Old Testament is full of the language of bread and feeding and plenty: and it really refers to the Word of God: *Man does not live on bread alone, but on the Word that comes from the mouth of God*. This was the lesson the Israelites learned, when they abandoned the security of slaves for the dependence and trust of the desert pilgrimage, where every day demands a new act of faith in God, and in Moses his servant. The quality of their following was always in question; in our first reading today they suggest that slavery with full bellies is better than freedom with the fear of starvation. Can you see yourself in this? I can surely see my own desire to hang onto the safety of the world whilst I still speak of the freedom of the children of God. There is an exodus I still need to make, before I discover the power of God to save me from my enslavement. The Bible *never* goes out of date. The Word of God is alive today.

“Bread That Cannot Last”

Jesus introduces a distinction between two sorts of feeding; one which is temporary, the other which has eternal value; what is this wonder-bread that he offers? He calls it *true bread*. We have a great cult for *real food* in our culture today: Jamie Oliver tells dinner-ladies to give children genuine healthy food: we go in search of organic flour and real ale; the Two Fat Ladies scour the countryside for

“proper ham”. This is very positive stuff, and can really help us to read the Gospel. But Jesus says that *true bread* is what comes down from heaven, and those who eat it will never die of hunger or thirst. In the business of feeding - farming, slaughter and harvest, preparation and refinement, storage and marketing, cooking and serving - we use up vast tracts of our effort and time. Even in washing up we can read the endless treadmill we’re turning in this cycle. Now treadmills are for slaves. We do it all every day, and every day the benefits run out, and we do it again - because we’re hungry again.

The Bread Of God

God’s gift is of a bread that gives life that is eternal, that doesn’t depend on the servile cycle of our work. We have been learning a lesson in our slavish pursuit of earthly safety: and the gift is when the penny drops, and we get the point. *Work for food that endures to eternal life!* There’s a thought for the day. Is there a career, a desire, a system of value, that can give eternal meaning to this drifting, tumbling, self-consuming life of ours? It’s like trying to carry sand in a string bag; and he is telling us of a way of doing it that stacks up for *eternity*. We want to know the name of this cast-iron stock, this certain tip. And he tells us: *I Am the bread of life. Come to me, and never be hungry again. Believe in me, and never be thirsty any more.*

“Who Are You Claiming To Be?”

There are only a very few moments in our lifetime, when someone will cross eyes with us, and seriously make us a promise like that, and stand half a chance of being believed. Do you recognise yourself here? Has it happened to you? What is he asking of you? Not much: he is asking for your love, for your life. What will he give you in return? He is promising you your self, your ultimate future, your meaning. When he says *eternal*, he is promising you God. If anyone’s ever offered you a relationship, take a look at this offer, and compare the terms. If you can take him seriously, think about it. If you’re just playing with him, beware. Nothing else will do, except your whole self, your complete faith in him. If you want a safety-net, a bit on the side, another way of living your life, forget him. He is telling you the truth in a world of lies. Time to choose.

Fr Philip