

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

A Question of Catering

Where can we buy bread for these people to eat? A question Jesus asks, in the fourth Gospel, as soon as he sees the crowd approaching. This is in perfect accord with last week's extract from Mark, where Jesus is moved with compassion by the simple fact of a crowd. Here, his first response is: *Feed them.* Philip says that *a year's wages would only give them a small piece each.* He is thinking of his own wages, of course, which he has presumably sacrificed in order to become a disciple. (I think those who have given up something good seldom forget the fact).

Moses Woz 'Ere

There is a place in Numbers where God tells Moses he will feed the people with meat. Moses thinks not, and reminds the Redeemer that there are 600,000 meat-hungry people: *If all the flocks and herds were slaughtered, would that be enough for them? If all the fish in the sea were caught, would that?* God is not impressed, and asks pointedly: *Is the arm of the Lord so short?* It is "almost Passover", so Jesus is echoing the Mosaic story quite consciously. Andrew steps in with his loaves and fishes, and the prophet Elisha is suddenly evoked, who fed a hundred men on twenty *barley loaves*: the bread of Passover. It seems that God has been feeding his own in unlikely places for a long time. That Jesus of Nazareth does the same gives us a clue to his identity. That will be the message of this sixth chapter of John, which arrives on our plates over the next few Sundays.

Judging Our Times

We should read the Gospel in such a way that it can challenge our lives today. We don't experience miraculous feeding easily; but food is so basic a reality that we can be united by it, not only across space, but across time as well. The hungry crowds of the past are all one with the hungry crowds of the present, and the same question is levelled at us today: *Where can we find bread for these people to eat?* It isn't to be taken as a crudely alimentary issue – though food is a prime necessity for anyone in need – but as standing for all the needs of life, from suckling, to redemption from death. Jesus' answer will be plain: *no-one who comes to me will hunger, no-one who believes in me will thirst.* It is in Christ that all the needs of the world will be fulfilled. If you believe that, you can stay; if you doubt that,

you have to leave. Jesus does not soften this moment of judgment, or give us a bit of leeway to shelter tender consciences. About this there is *no compromise.*

The Lineaments of the Eucharist

If the feeding in the desert takes on the likeness of the Eucharist, we can't be surprised. So Jesus takes the loaves, gives thanks, breaks and distributes them "as much as was wanted". But this chapter is not primarily about believing in the Eucharist. It's more fundamental even than that. It's about believing that Jesus is the Son of God, sent down from heaven to give life to the world. This is a piece of *teaching*, the vital heart of all Jesus' message: that, in him, God is speaking his final and eternal Word, to the world that was created through his Word. Jesus embodies the Word of God, and you either believe that (and live) or disbelieve it (and die in your sins). Clearly, to water down this teaching would be like changing the label on the cyanide from *POISON!* to *Drink With Care.* Politically correct, perhaps, but dangerous to those who deserve the truth.

Listen On

It would be worthwhile before next Sunday to look up the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, and to read the passage we omit from the Sunday readings – the story of Jesus' walking on the lake. This Exodus theme of a path through the waters recalls our baptism into Christ. We, then, are already committed!

Fr Philip