

Today's Gospel is the beginning of a saga through the sixth chapter of John, which will last us until a week tomorrow. It's an extremely good example of a Johannine chapter, and it repays diligent study.

One of the trends of John's Gospel is to take an apparently simple happening, which might be interpreted as a small incident, and to dig down into its inner meaning. This is no longer reporting a superficial happening. Instead the Gospel is treating what happens on the surface as a *sign* of realities far larger and far more important, which lie buried beneath the surface of life.

Our religion must treat the whole of our human experience as one huge and complex *sign* by which we can eventually read the mind of God. God has always revealed himself by his creation: that is why the Gospel tells us that all things come to be through the Word - bringing with them the communication of the mind of God. If we follow the advice of John the Baptist in yesterday's Gospel we will not stop at an earthly understanding of our lives or of anything that makes them up: instead we will take a heavenly view of them, and start to read them as signs of God's presence, and of the future that awaits us as he makes us able to become his children.

So today sees the apparently simple question arising: *How are these people to be fed?* Jesus has already been feeding them spiritually, which explains their approaching him in a large crowd. He asks the question *to test* the response of the disciples, who respond by drawing attention to their poverty. Already the Gospel is working on us, and encouraging us to retain the deeper realities of the story: it was shortly before Passover, the time for remembering the great signs God gave of his favour and fidelity, and his almighty power in overcoming the powers of this earth (Pharaoh and his army). Feeding the people in the desert was the first trial for Moses, and it found a heavenly answer rather than an earthly one. The ensuing journey towards the Promised Land was not a practical earthly migration, but a holy pilgrimage, depending hour by hour on the presence of God, who *fed his people from heaven*. Jesus is therefore not asking a simple question, but one that has religious depths. The disciples unconsciously echo the Old Testament; Moses asks God, *If we slaughtered all our flocks, would that be enough for them?* and the boy with the little picnic comes from the story of Elisha's miraculous feeding of a hundred men with five barley loaves. So the Law and the Prophets are already involved with us in the simple question Jesus asks at Passover time, in a deserted place: *How are these people to be fed?*

The miracle is soon over, and the fragments to be gathered up recalls the gathering of the multitude around Jesus. Twelve baskets make twelve tribes in the wilderness, and Jesus appears as the new Moses, gathering and shepherding. The people have a more earthly response: they want to make him a King, which is a matter of earthly power, and which shows that for them the sign is still obscured by their earthly minds. So Jesus refuses their homage, and *goes back to the hills*: the Exodus Israelites imagined God as watching their progress from the mountains beside them: they called him God of the Mountains, *El Shaddai*. It is as if Jesus has symbolically drawn back from the incarnate rôle of his ministry, and gone to commune with the Father before he teaches the people to desire true bread, not that which passes, and leaves us hungry again.