

The sixth chapter of John is about the reading of the world as a sign of God. Jesus is said to have given a sign by feeding the multitude in the desert; its reading requires the knowledge of Moses feeding the people with manna in the desert, it requires the sensitivity of people who know that it is almost Passover, and it requires the knowledge that Moses, at the end of Deuteronomy, promises the Israelites that God will raise up another prophet like him, and that when this happens they must listen to him.

The teaching which will make up next week's readings will spell all of this out, and Jesus will challenge the people to receive him as the fulfilment of all that Moses said and did: it will demand that they recognise what is happening in Jesus as much *more* vital than what happened in Moses: in other words, the great deeds of Moses will themselves appear as mere signs of what Jesus was to do in the future.

What did Moses do? He turned the people from a rabble of escaped slaves into a people ready to listen to God's voice. What will Jesus do? He will take all the people prepared to trust him into a new promised land, where they will receive life from above - by means of true bread from heaven.

Today's extract from chapter six does not get involved with theology. Instead we receive another resonant sign from Jesus. He had left the scene of the feeding in haste, escaping from the crowd's inadequate understanding, which would have mugged him into claiming earthly kingship, and brought his whole mission to an early and bloody end for no good cause. At first we simply see the disciples sailing alone: this reminds us that a time will come for the bridegroom to leave them, and the darkness will seem to engulf them on the night of his death. The orphaned Church is struggling against the wind, and making no headway. Then suddenly he is miraculously with them, using the treacherous sea as a pathway: and there falls about him the divine mantle of the one who sits enthroned over the oceans, who stills the roaring of the wind and the sea. It is the theme of the Exodus again, where God parted the waters and made a path of them. As they cry out in fear he speaks the divine name, *I Am He!* and their difficulties are past.

The dark struggle is on for the minds and hearts, for the faith of the people Jesus addresses. For all of them, a moment is approaching when they must make their choice. At the end of this chapter, some will choose to leave him, and to listen to him no more; those who remain must begin to speak of him with a new commitment, and the vision of his divine crossing of the sea will help them to do this, by its value as a sign, practically without the need for any words to be spoken.