

Jesus told the crowd yesterday that “working for God” means “believing in the one he has sent”. We now know, therefore, that the response Jesus wants from the sign (feeding the five thousand) is *faith*. We also know that the faith he is asking for is *faith in him* as the One whom God has sent.

We should spare a moment to see how telling this is about Jesus’ mind. He is the very embodiment of humility, yet he knows with perfect certainty that unless everyone he can see before him comes to see him as the heart of their world, they will be lost. In this he resembles the prophets of Israel: *the message I bear is vital for all, and what you do to me out of hatred or fear changes nothing*. But here there is something more. Jesus says something today which puts all the prophets into the shade. *I am the message*, he says, *I am the bread of life*.

Moses could not have said it, Elijah would rather have died than say it. Jesus says it as simply and firmly as could be. One can almost hear the gasp of his listeners, as they hear a human being demand their faith in this way. The fact that his statement begins with the Name of God, *I AM*, simply deepens the shock. This is a claim for credit unparalleled. To accept it means a complete re-examination of their religion, the principles they have lived by for two thousand years. Rule one: *I AM the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt; you shall not have strange gods before me. You shall not worship anything that is on the face of the earth, above the earth, or in the waters under the earth. I AM the Lord*. Every Jew knows that God is One, unrivalled. Yet here is a man taking the name of God to himself, demanding the honour that is reserved for the One, claiming the heart of each of his listeners. What will this carpenter’s son from an obscure village ask for next: that we go down on our knees and worship him?

Something more is happening to the Scripture. Mixed into this narrative is the form of a Rabbi’s sermon. The fact that it looks more like a conversation - or, eventually, a row - must not stop us recognising this, for it is deeply important. The rabbi’s first job is to take up the text on which he is to speak, and read it. (You know that this is an art, for there are no vowels in written Hebrew, and the vowels are vital for the meaning, as they change the tenses of verbs; it is also down to the rabbi to say who is meant by pronouns like *he*.) The text is supplied here by the crowd: *he gave them bread from heaven to eat*. Jesus attributes the pronoun: *not Moses, but my Father*. Another sharp intake of breath: he is making himself familiar with the Most High! Then he changes the tense: *not “he gave” but “he is giving” bread from heaven*. Suddenly the air is alive with electricity: the rabbi claims that God *his Father* is at this moment giving us bread from heaven. They push him further. *Give us that bread always....* and then he says it: *I AM the bread of life. Come to me, and you will never hunger: believe in me, and you will never thirst*.

It would be quite wrong to say that Jesus here is already speaking about the Eucharist. In a sense what he is asking for is much more basic than that. The Eucharist would be a mere ceremonial, a remembrance of a fine man, unless we first accept him as the divine message of God. This is far more personal; they have to make a terrifying choice about him. Can you accept him as the central figure of the creation, who has complete authority over your religion? If you want to imagine the impact in your own terms, could you accept a priest who arrived in Lincoln claiming to be the Fourth Person of the Holy Trinity? He has given us great signs, he has fed us, he speaks with authority; but can you accept this dizzying claim?