

The Gospel of John
Session Five – The Bread of Life
(John 6:1 - 71)



Greek Orthodox icon of Jesus Christ "The Bread of Life"
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Wisdom Association with Eating and Drinking
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Wisdom Association with Eating and Drinking

With good reason it has been observed that wisdom is associated with eating and drinking. For example, wisdom invites the reader or hearer: "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed" (Proverbs 9:5). Or again: "Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more" (Sirach 24:19, 14; cf. John 4:13 – 14). The significance of wisdom in the background of the prologue suggests its presence at other important points.

Because wisdom motifs are so closely associated with incarnation in Johannine theology, and because wisdom supplies food and drink – indeed, is to be consumed – there is here a natural or logical link between incarnation and sacrament. Wisdom is the key. Yet in the words about flesh and blood, Jesus offers himself to those who desire life. Indeed, he offers himself in such terms as to indicate clearly that unless he is accepted, that is, eaten and drunk, one can have no part in him. This is why interpreters have seen in his words the

presentation, indeed enforcement, of a sacramental view of salvation through Christ.

But do these words have to do primarily with the Eucharist, and if so, why? This is a pressing question in view of John's presentation of salvation elsewhere. Such emphasis on the sacrament becomes intelligible in view of the Gospel's insistence on the importance of confessing Jesus at the cost of being expelled from or coming out of, the synagogue. It may be that participation in the eating and drinking of the flesh and blood of the Eucharist is the dividing point, in worship, between those who do not believe in Jesus, or, indeed, believe but do not confess Jesus publicly for fear of being put out of the synagogue, and those who have believed, confessed, come out of the synagogue, and now meet for worship as Jesus' disciples. Their defining act of worship is the eating and drinking of the meal that is his sacrifice and himself. John then becomes a kind of magna carta of distinctly Christian worship. The eating and drinking of Jesus defines Christian worship as such in John, as it has ever since.

– D. Moody Smith (from *John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999)

Philip and Andrew, the Red Sea and Manna

We penetrate the sense of this episode by examining first the meaning attributed to the disciple Andrew, then the meaning attributed to Philip, and finally what these stories would mean in the Hebrew tradition that gave the followers of Jesus the ears to hear what the gospel writers were communicating.

Andrew, as John portrays him, appears to be one of those people who has an identity only by referral to someone else. Recall the way this gospel introduces Andrew and Philip. Andrew, we are told, was a disciple of John the baptizer who, when he hears John's witness to Jesus, begins to follow Jesus. We are told, Andrew goes . . . to find his brother Simon and to announce to him: "We have found the messiah." Simon then comes and Jesus looks at him and immediately gives him the nickname Peter, which means "Rock" (John 1:42).

The next day . . . Jesus finds Philip and invites him also to become a disciple. Philip then goes and finds the one who is named Nathaniel and repeats to him the identification of Jesus previously used, as John continues to emphasize this point: Jesus is the one of whom Moses wrote in the law, the one pointed to by the prophets. Andrew is always deferential, content to play the role of the insignificant one. Andrew is the gatekeeper who opens the door to others and allows great things to happen. He seems to have no need for status, no need to accumulate recognition. I think of him as the patron saint of the ordinary people.

That theme is also operating when John has Andrew bring to Jesus the lad with the five loaves and two fish. A hungry multitude is before him and he confronts it with a boy's lunchbox! There is, however, no gift that, in the mind of this self-effacing man, is too small or too insignificant not to be used and even valued. So with Jesus now aware of this boy's gift, Andrew, having facilitated the connection, stands by and watches as the events unfold and the multitude is fed.

Behind this story clearly looms the figure of Moses. That is why John has so often repeated the designation of Jesus as the prophet promised by Moses. If he is going to be identified in this Moses role, then stories of Moses must be wrapped around him. Arguably, the two most dramatic Moses stories are the power seen in the feeding of the hungry multitude in the wilderness with heavenly bread called manna, which was rained down from the sky, and the power seen in the splitting of the Red Sea. Both of these stories were survival stories. The sequence in the Hebrew scriptures was the Red Sea first, followed by the story of manna in the wilderness, but in those scriptures the Passover on the night of the exodus preceded the Red Sea. Since John will describe the feeding of the multitude as a Passover meal, he puts that story before the story of Jesus demonstrating his power over water, where Jesus does not split the lake to walk on dry land, but walks on the water to get to his followers and bring them to safety. The feeding of the multitude and Jesus walking on the water are always together, because both of these narratives are Moses stories and both are together in the story of the exodus.

Jesus, the prophet anticipated by Moses, is now revealed to possess the power that the God of Moses possessed. He can feed a hungry multitude in the wilderness with bread. He can transcend the barrier that water brings when it must be navigated, John then develops these images in his own distinctive way.

John's Jesus will make the claim that he is himself "the bread of life," which satisfies the deepest hunger in the human soul; in addition, by locating this feeding episode at the time of the Passover, John consciously identifies Jesus with the paschal lamb. He will make this identification overt later by refusing to view the Last Supper as a Passover meal, in contradistinction to the earlier gospels. He chooses to have the crucifixion of Jesus occur on the day of preparation for the Passover so that Jesus will be crucified at the exact moment that the paschal lamb is slaughtered. Recall that John the baptizer has already referred to Jesus earlier in John's gospel as the "lamb of God."

After the multitude is fed Jesus begins to teach them about the meaning of the food they have just consumed. It is, he says, the food which "endures to eternal life." To make sure John's readers get the point of this feeding story, John has Jesus relate it directly to Moses and the wilderness, but then he raises to another higher level. Only the bread of God that gives life to the world will ultimately satisfy the deepest human hunger. Then Jesus says one of the most provocative things that John ever records him saying: "You must," therefore, "eat my flesh" and "drink my blood."

The walls of literalism in their minds rise to block the insight. Eating flesh and drinking blood are not pleasant images. They are, in fact, repellent. Suddenly John tells us that all this talk about eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood took place "in the synagogue as he taught in Capernaum" (John 6:59). We readers thought that it had taken place in the wilderness or on a mountainside, but note that it was "in the synagogue."

By the time John wrote, Jesus' disciples had been cast out of the synagogue. So John was saying to them that Jesus must be to them both a new Moses and a new doorway into the meaning of God. What Jesus was to them was not just another (albeit different) path of religion. They were now out of the synagogue for good, but what Jesus was offering did not require a synagogue or the Torah. They needed to see Jesus ultimately, John tells us, as a part of who God is, "ascending to where he was before" (John 6:62). This is where even the twelve drew back, choosing to be with him no longer. The disciples seemed to prefer the religious security from which they had been expelled to the anxiety of walking to a new place in their own life of the spirit.

That is why when the disciples left Jesus and took to their boats to start across the Sea of Galilee, John mentions that it was "dark." Darkness to this gospel writer is always a metaphor for being apart from Christ. The disciples were alone at sea. A strong wind was blowing. This was when Jesus was said to have come to them "walking on the sea." They were filled with fear, but he said to them: "I am." That is not the way the text is translated, because even the translators did not understand the meaning of these words. The translators had Jesus say: "It is I," but the Greek words in the original text are *ego eimi* – "I am." Jesus was claiming the name of God. I am the life of God, he was saying, calling you into something new, something frightening and dangerous. I am the love of God calling you to move beyond your defensive barriers, your security walls and into a new understanding of what it means to be human. Eat my flesh – take my life into yours. Drink my blood – open your spirit to my spirit. Receive me from the water into your boat.

– John Shelby Spong (adapted from *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper One, New York, 2013)

The Power of John's Language

John's use of symbolic language is extraordinarily powerful. His images are often "archetypal" (literally, imprinted in human psyches from the beginning). They flow out of the depths of human experience and longing. We see this with great clarity in the "I am" statements that he attributes to Jesus.

"I am the light of the world" (8:12). The archetypal image is darkness and light and its close relative, blindness and seeing. The image is not only in John's prologue, but in the story of Nicodemus (John 3), who came to Jesus "by night" – he is still in the dark. In John 9, the overcoming of blindness and Jesus as the "light of the world" are juxtaposed.

"I am the bread of life" (6:35). Here the archetypal image is hunger – we hunger for food, and for more than food. Jesus is the "bread of life." John 4 uses the closely related image of thirst: Jesus is the "living water."

"I am the gate" (10:7). Jesus is the gate or door of the sheepfold as well as the Good Shepherd who leads the sheep through the gate (10:11). The larger application of the image is "gate" and "door" as threshold, or point of entry, into a new way of life.

"I am the way" (14:6). The statement, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Is for some Christians one of the troublesome passages in the New Testament, because it is commonly used to proclaim the superiority and exclusive truth of Christianity. John may have meant it this way in his historical context of conflict between Christian Jews and non-Christian Jews; to his community, he was saying, "What you see in Jesus is the way to true life; don't go back to the way you came from." But to draw the conclusion that Christianity is the only true religion is to go beyond what he meant in his historical context. For John, the image of Jesus as "the way" means the same as Jesus as "the gate," the threshold into new life.

"I am . . . the truth" (14:6). To continue with the second term in the triad, the opposite of truth is falsehood, the lie. What is seen and embodied in Jesus is "the truth," not what is seen and embodied in the world the way it is. In John's story of Jesus's trial, Pilate asks, "What is the truth?" (18:38). Given John's use of symbolic language, the irony is apparent: "the truth" – Jesus – is standing right in front of him, and Pilate is about to condemn him – and thus condemn "the truth."

"I am . . . the life" (14:6). The opposite of the third term in the series is death. Jesus is "the life" – what we see embodied in him is "the life." He is the abundant life" referred to in 10:10. So also in the story of the raising of Lazarus, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life (11:25). What we see in Jesus is life in contrast to confinement in a tomb.

Jesus's symbolic use of language is magnificently signaled in his inaugural story of Jesus's public activity. At a wedding in Cana, Jesus changed a very large amount of water into wine (150 gallons – 750 bottles in modern terms). The story in John 2 begins, "On the third day," but John provides no chronological context for the phrase. Rather, its meaning is symbolic. Big things happen in the Bible on "the third day," and in particular the phrase points forward to the resurrection of Jesus "on the third day."

The next phrase is “there was a wedding,” Just as “the third day” has symbolic meaning in the Bible, so also does marriage imagery. God’s relationship to Israel, the union between heaven and earth, the divine-human union. This, John is saying is what the story of Jesus is about – the marriage between heaven and earth. And more, it is about a wedding at which the wine never runs out and the best is saved for last.

– Marcus Borg (from *Evolution of the Word*, Harper One, 2012)

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