

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

BREAD KING? NO!

John 6:1-21

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. 2A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. 3Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. 4Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. 5When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" 6He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. 7Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." 8One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 9There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people? 10Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. 11Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. 12When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." 13So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. 14When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

15When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

16When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. 18The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. 19When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. 20But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." 21Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

DIAGNOSIS: "Bread King? No!"

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Panem Pacifiers*

"Hunger Games" is a parable of our present state in futuristic terms: a ruling society engrossed in superficial appeasement. The nation Panem (from the Latin phrase Panem et Circenses, "Bread & Circuses"), evokes the declining Roman empire where those who governed tried to keep the masses satisfied, not with real long-lasting public service, but with handouts of bread (panem) and with violent, but distracting, spectator activities (circuses).

Where would our global neighbors peg us on this global map? In the twelve drab outlying districts where people starve and eke out life on a subsistence level? Or, in the capital city where colorful, comfortable (yet hollow) citizens gorge themselves on empty outrageous feasts? Either way there is plenty of malnutrition going on, despite the panem pacifiers—the handouts of bread.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Settling for Less

If we are malnourished, it is because we are settling for a food that is less than what God would give. In John 6, the malnourished multitude missed the “sign” (the significance of the miracle), because they saw Jesus only as a miraculous hand who could dole out lots of loaves of bread, and not as the heaven-sent “Bread of Life” who offers up his life for the sake of the world. Who wouldn’t want Jesus as their king if all he did was to give free groceries every time he came around?

We do it, too. We treat Jesus as a Bread King and enthrone him in our hearts because we think that he is the one who will stabilize our economy, ensure our health, rescue our job, multiply our money, and shore up our security. But God has something baking in the oven of his love other than belly-burgers. There is a “leavening,” a “raising up,” a “yeasty rising” of a Life-Giving Bread who feeds those-who-dare-to-believe-in-him with a life from God that never ends. How’s that for long-lasting?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Pandemonium

The God who comes to us in Jesus Christ will not become a big-box superstore that provides us anything we want at as low a price as possible. Jesus is not a divine vending machine who doles out the goods in return for tiny tokens of our love and affection. This Lord has little patience for those who go through life “cafeteria style,” picking out only the things they want and passing by everything else.

Jesus walks away from anyone who comes to him like that. Jesus leaves the disbelieving crowd in the dark, noisy, stormy sea-sick uproar that comes from serving lesser gods. John Milton invented the perfect word for that—Pandemonium!—his name for the capital of hell in *Paradise Lost*. When you see the “bread” that

Jesus provides as just another governmental handout (panem), you get “pandemonium,” which is simply just another form of hell.

PROGNOSIS: “The Saving Crucified King, Yes!”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : A New Math

Jesus did not come to be a Bread King. He came to be the Bread of Life, the King of Love, Manna from heaven, the Crucified One, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world by being lifted up and “enthroned” upon a cross, and who stills the stormy hearts that are so terrified. With Jesus comes a new math. Take one, add five and two, divide by 5,000 and have twelve to carry. Take one small boy, add five barley loaves and two small fish, divide among 5,000 people, and have twelve baskets of leftovers to carry unto the entire world—all twelve of the drab and dreary outlying districts.

All this is a “sign”(the fourth and central one for John, and the only one that appears in all four gospels-so it must be extremely important!) of the new math God establishes once and for all through the cross of Jesus Christ. God took the body of one man; added to it the guilt and ruin of this world; multiplied and divided it; reduced it down to zero. And ended up with a bountiful grace more than enough to satisfy the pressing needs of all of us-with plenty left to carry on and over into mission and in ministry. Mathematically, that sign looks like this: “X.” Or this, “+”. Christians trace that very sign across their heads and hearts multiple times when gathered on the Lord’s Day for public worship.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Multiplication

Jesus created a banquet in the wilderness. A Holy “Eucharist.” A feast or festival of thanksgiving. This is the Lord’s Supper in Saint John’s gospel. There is none other. Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, and distributes it. And we who eat the body and blood of Christ become the body of Christ, as Jesus takes us in

his hands, blesses us, breaks us and distributes us as food for a famished world.

Yes, there is a dying and a rising. But so it is with every loaf of bread. Living yeast dies in order to make that dry, dusty, powdery stuff called “flour” rise. And the end result is nothing short of absolutely delicious. Manna. Bread from heaven that tastes like honey–Baklava! Yet, even this heavenly manna is only a tantalizing foretaste of a greater feast to come. The messianic meal is prefigured in every meal which Jesus ate, but above all in this meal–the eucharistic one.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Lots to Carryover! And so the bread that is given is not Panem et Circenses but the paschal mystery of Christ himself. Jesus does not leave us alone and abandoned in the dark and stormy uproar that rocks the world today. Rather he jumps in the same boat with us and says, “It is I; do not be afraid.” And that is enough to take us to the “land” that we are going, which is, of course, his good and gentle rule inside our hearts.

A good and gracious rule that results in “public service.” True public service. The real thing. Which is “leitourgia” (public worship, liturgy that praises and proclaims the name of Christ) and “diakonia” (public hands-on help, done in the name of Christ). For this is what any government needs to be ultimately about–true public service. Jesus said, “I am the Bread of Life; whoever comes to me shall never hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” Lord, give us this bread....always!