

## 17<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B (2024)

During the course of this liturgical year, our Sunday Gospel readings have been taken from the Gospel according to S. Mark: and, though his was the first Gospel to be written chronologically, this is because it appears second in the canon of the New Testament, and is thus assigned to the second of the three year lectionary cycle. But today, as the more astute will have noticed, our Gospel reading was taken from that according to S. John, the fourth Evangelist: and thus we begin a five-week excursus that will focus our attention on the sixth chapter of S. John's Gospel, more commonly known as the 'Bread of Life Discourse'; and today's passage forms the prelude to that discourse, in which we hear S. John's account of the miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand.

S. John's is not only the last canonical Gospel, but was also the last to be written, probably around 40 years after that of S. Mark; and, because of this, the Evangelist and the community for whom he wrote had more time to meditate upon the meaning and purpose of Jesus' life and teaching, death and resurrection. We see this most beautifully conveyed in the first chapter, the prologue, of his Gospel, in which S. John sets out the theology of the *logos*, the Word made flesh, thus evincing the Church's doctrine of the Incarnation. And for this reason, the fourth Gospel has often been described as the most theological and the most spiritual: indeed, it is true that S. John presents a high Christology – that is, a very clear and developed understanding of the person of Jesus Christ – in his

writing; but that is not to say that the other three Evangelists were any less theologically-minded; indeed, each Gospel offers its own unique, theological prism through which we are able better to see and understand their subject, Jesus Christ. But, what we will hear over the next few weeks is a highly developed theological treatise, setting out for us and for the Church the foundation of the doctrine of the Eucharist – the Mass, in which bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, who tells us through S. John's Gospel that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood have eternal life, and that he shall raise them up on the last day.

And, in order to prepare us to receive that teaching, S. John deliberately placed his account of the well-known miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand immediately before the 'Bread of Life Discourse', in such a way as to reinforce Jesus' teaching, and to prefigure what he would do at the Last Supper, and has done ever since at every celebration of the Mass – to miraculously feed his gathered people with himself, the Bread of Life.

The miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand must be one of, if not, the most well-known of all of Jesus' miracles: and, as is always the case when we encounter the miraculous, it is important to keep an open mind, and not just to ask 'How did it happen?' but also, 'What does it mean?' There is a particular liberal and revisionist school of theology, stemming from the Enlightenment and reaching its apogee in the mid- to late-C20th, that seeks to explain away the miraculous

nature of Jesus' ministry by finding rational explanations for what the Gospel writers deemed to be supernatural events. In the case of today's miracle, the Feeding of the Five Thousand, the explanation given is that Jesus and his disciples had taken their own food with them but, seeing the need of others, were gracious in sharing their provisions; this, in turn, then prompted others to follow their example of generosity, which spread through the crowd until all had eaten their fill. And, whilst this would be a heart-warming and edifying encouragement to a greater awareness of the needs of others, and of one's own moral obligation to share, in and of itself, this explanation of the Feeding of the Five Thousand fails to take into account both the undoubted, supernatural element of Jesus' ministry, and also its theological implications for what was to come.

What is obvious is that, for S. John and the community to which he belonged, the miracle of the Multiplication of the Loaves was intimately and inextricably bound to their understanding of the Eucharist, the Mass: and, just as the Feeding of the Five Thousand cannot be explained away simply in terms of the rational, so the Mass requires the faith that sees beyond the obvious and the explicable to discern the Body and Blood of the Lord with whom, as we are nourished with the Bread of Life, we have a relationship, as did those whom he fed by the Sea of Galilee, and in the Upper Room of the Last Supper. And it is this faith and this relationship that distinguish Christians from the world around us: because, it is only with the eyes of faith that we are able to perceive the presence of Jesus

in the consecrated Host and Chalice; just as it is only by being in relationship with him, through the reception of his Body and Blood, that we are given grace – divine and supernatural help – to rise above our natural propensity to self-centredness, and to grow in virtue, as we seek to model our lives on that of him, whose Body we both receive and become in our reception of Holy Communion.

S. John understood the miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand to be a foreshadowing of the eucharistic miracle by which Jesus would feed his people at all times and in all places, unfailingly and superabundantly, in the supreme act of worship that he commanded his disciples to perpetuate in remembrance of him. Though he uses allusive language and highly developed theological propositions, S. John points to a simple truth: that the Word made Flesh and Second Person of the Trinity, who was able to feed five thousand people with five barley loaves and two fish two thousand years ago, is still able to – and does – feed his people today, with nothing less than himself, the entirety of the Body and Blood, soul and divinity of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Son of God.

It is only through faith that we can accept this truth, just as it only through faith that we can accept any of the miraculous events in Jesus' life and ministry: but as our Faith is founded upon the premise that God in Christ took flesh and dwelt among us in order to redeem our humanity with his divinity, is it really so incredible that he continues to be with and nourish his people by making bread and wine his very flesh and blood to be? Amen.