

THE GOOD NEWS
Ordinary Time 17 and 18
by Paul Turner

As Mae West said, "Too much of a good thing is not enough." She probably did not have John's Gospel in mind, but the sentiment fits the dilemma we face over the next five weeks as we get too much of a good thing. The sixth chapter of John's gospel must be one of the most sublime passages in the bible. But as we hear it piecemeal from now to the end of summer, we get too much of the gospel we can't get enough of.

This year the lectionary features Mark. But because of its brevity, and since we do not devote an entire year to John, Mark takes a summer vacation while John goes to work.

This makes more sense than it first appears to. At this point in Mark's Gospel, the sequence of events runs amazingly parallel to John. The first three gospels are so similar we call them "synoptics"--the ones with a common eye. The fourth gospel is so different it's called -- well, it's called "John".

But at this point of the story, Mark and John run in tandem. Jesus feeds the 5000 (Mark 6:30-44; John 6:1-15). Jesus walks on the sea (Mark 6:45-51; John 6:16-24). The crowd requests a sign (Mark 8:11-13; John 6:25-34). Jesus comments on bread (Mark 8:14-21; John 6:35-59). Peter confesses his faith (Mark 8:27-30; John 6:60-69). Jesus alludes to his passion (Mark 8:31-33; John 6:70-71). It's a good spot for John to intervene.

Mark and John tell the story of next Sunday's gospel (John 6:1-15) with similar detail. The feeding of the multitude appears six times in the New Testament, in each of the gospels but twice in Matthew and Mark. Only Mark and John agree that the crowd numbered five thousand and that they shared five loaves and two fish. Other details vary. A story like this had a life of its own before the evangelists put it on paper. People who could not write told the story to one another. Both Mark and John probably heard it from a similar source, and without knowing how the other was writing out the details they each composed an inspired version.

John hides much meaning here. He opens with a reference to the Sea of Tiberias, the same place where the risen Jesus will appear at the end of the gospel (21:1). The story takes place near Passover, the feast of unleavened bread. The boy with the food has barley loaves, the same grain mentioned in the feeding of the multitude in the first reading (2 Kings 4:42-44). Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them, using the actions of the Last Supper in the other gospels. All these details show the story concerns not just another miracle, but a miracle which points to the resurrection, to the power of God, and to the presence of Christ in our eucharistic meal.

The gospel for the following Sunday (6:24-35) plunges us into the discourse on the bread of life.

The first reading (Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15, 31a) prepares for it. During the exodus from Egypt the followers of Moses find themselves in a desert without food. Moses prays and God provides bread from heaven. They called it "manna," which roughly translates the ungrateful expression, "What's this?"

To prompt the discourse from Jesus, the people quote this event: "God gave them bread from heaven to eat." Jesus volleys the serve: God provided something like bread through Moses, but now God provides true bread through Jesus.

In this part of the discourse, Jesus uses language which recalls his conversation with the woman of Samaria. There he contrasted himself with a water which does not quench thirst (4:13-14). Here he advises the crowd not to work for food which will perish (6:26). There the woman asked for living water (4:15). Here the people ask for the bread of God (6:34). Consequently, the image of bread may have more to do with Jesus as the revelation of God's word, and less to do with the eucharist. The reference to the eucharist becomes much stronger later the discourse, but it appears that Jesus is only warming up to it here.

Since this chapter is too much to absorb at once, we may limit ourselves to a preparatory meditation over the next few weeks: Jesus reveals the power and presence of the word of God.

The End