

SERMON NOTES

Fourth Sunday After Christmas
Sunday of the Catechumens
Synaxis Gospel
John 6:22-38

THE BREAD OF LIFE

INTRODUCTION

In his Gospel, the Apostle John records three Passover celebrations during the ministry of Jesus. However we know that there was another that he did not mention.¹ Since these celebrations occurred once per year, it is thought that our Lord's public ministry extended over a period of somewhat more than three years. The fourth and final Passover is the occasion of the Crucifixion. In John's Gospel, at this season of the year during His ministry, Jesus always referred to His approaching death. The events of our Synaxis reading occurred just prior to the third Passover, which means that Jesus was here entering the last year of His ministry before His Crucifixion.

In this episode, Jesus had miraculously fed five thousand men plus women and children the previous day. Jesus perceived that the excited crowd intended to force Him to become their political king. Therefore He had slipped away from them to the nearby mountain while He sent His disciples by boat across the Sea of Galilee. During the night the disciples had labored to row in the darkness amidst a storm. They had only reached the mid point of the sea when, terrified, they saw Jesus walking on the sea toward them. Immediately after receiving Him into the boat, they found themselves at their destination. Our reading begins in the day following.

SYNAXIS READING

John 6:22-38

The next day the multitude that stood on the other side of the sea saw that there was no other small boat there, except one, and that Jesus had not entered with His disciples into the boat, but that His disciples had gone away alone.

¹ The first Passover is mentioned at John 2:13, the second Passover is not mentioned by John but the events recorded require two years to have elapsed by the mention of this Passover at John 6:4. The fourth and final Passover is recorded beginning in John 11:55. For a discussion of the elapsed time between Passover one and three see R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), pp. 358-60.

There came other small boats from Tiberias near to the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks.

When the multitude therefore saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they themselves got into the small boats, and came to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

And when they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did You get here?"

Jesus answered them and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you; you seek Me, not because of the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled.

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him the Father, even God, has set His seal."

They said therefore to Him, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?"

Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."

They said therefore to Him, "What then do You do for a sign, that we may see, and believe You? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written, HE GAVE THEM BREAD OUT OF HEAVEN TO EAT."

Jesus therefore said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven.

For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world."

They said therefore to Him, "Lord, evermore give us this bread."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.

But I say to you, that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe.

All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.

For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him Who sent Me."

NOTES

The next day the multitude that stood on the other side of the sea saw that there was no other small boat there, except one, and that Jesus had not entered with His disciples into the boat, but that His disciples had gone away alone.

The translation above is not clear. Perhaps we should understand: "The next day the crowd stood at the place where the disciples had left in the only small boat that had been there the night before." This was on the northeastern side of the Sea of Galilee. They had probably seen the disciples leave. Given this situation, they must have been puzzled as to the whereabouts of Jesus.

There came other small boats from Tiberias near to the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks.

Tiberias was a newly established city on the western shores of the Sea of Galilee (also referred to as the Sea of Tiberias). The city was built in honor of the Roman emperor Tiberius by Herod Agrippa. This was the King Herod who had executed John the Baptist.

This verse is considered by some scholars to be a later gloss.² If so it was probably added to smooth out the fact that the multitude had seen only one boat, the one that had left with the disciples the night before, and now there were other small boats the next day recorded in the following verse.

When the multitude therefore saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they themselves got into the small boats, and came to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

Perhaps they thought that Jesus would eventually join His disciples.

² See for example J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel to St. John*, Vol 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 189. Besides the text critical problem in transmission, the most significant objection to the verse being original is the un-Johannine use of "the Lord" for Jesus before the Resurrection and the writer's "giving a sacramental turn to the miracle, which Jn. Studiously avoids in his narrative" of the feeding of the five thousand. The language is seen as "sacramental" because of its use of "bread" in the singular as is common in the Eucharist rather than "loaves" as in other references to the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Moreover, the phrase "after the Lord had given thanks" is seen by Bernard as suggesting "that this was the central fact which would at once identify the occurrence, whereas we expect an expression like 'where He fed the multitudes.' "

And when they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him,
“Rabbi, when did You get here?”

‘Rabbi’ is a title that is often used in John’s Gospel. The first time he used it (John 1:38) John translates the Hebrew term Rabbi as ‘Teacher.’

It is interesting that the crowd asks “when?” instead of “how?” The fastest way to get there was by boat, and they knew He didn’t go by boat. It took much longer to walk around the sea. So they figured He walked, the timing is what puzzled them.

Jesus answered them and said, “Truly, truly, I say to you; you seek Me, not because of the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled.

Jesus did not answer their question, but went straight to the important issue: why they were seeking Him.

Jesus rightly accused them of looking for Him because they were interested in getting more physical food (without working for it). They had not understood the “sign” of the miracle—Who the miracle had shown Him to be—and so they were not seeking Him for the proper reason. They had not recognized Him as their long promised Savior from their sins.

Do not seek for the food that perishes; but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you,

They were looking for physical food from Jesus; thus they were only looking for food that would sustain physical life. Already the physical food they had eaten the day before was gone. They were probably hungry again.

Jesus promised a different kind of food, one that would last for eternal life.

‘Son of Man’ is the title Jesus used most often for Himself. The prophet Daniel saw a vision in which “with the clouds of heaven, one like a Son of Man was coming . . . and to Him was given a dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him.”³

Later, at His trial before His Crucifixion, the Jewish High Priest asked Jesus, “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One [God]?” and Jesus responded, “I am; and you shall see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, AND COMING WITH THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN.” This response seems to indicate that when Jesus used the term ‘Son of Man’ for Himself, He was claiming to be the Son of Man of Daniel’s vision.

for on Him the Father, even God, has set His seal.

A seal is a sign of authentication by the one sealing a document, letter or other representation of his self. The Holy Spirit is the seal of God which bears witness that the Bearer belongs to Him.⁴ The Holy Spirit also bears witness to the believer concerning Jesus Christ.⁵

They said therefore to Him, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?”

Interested, the people asked what they needed to do to qualify in God’s sight to receive this enduring bread.

³ Daniel 7:13-14.

⁴ Those who believe in Christ have this seal of the Holy Spirit as well (Ephesians 1:13 and 4:30).

⁵ See also John 5:37-38 and John 14:36.

Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.”

Jesus referring to Himself in the third person told them the qualifying action on their part was simply to believe in Him, the One sent by God.

This “work of God” that is required of them is not a ‘work’ at all; it is an act of faith that is required. As St. Paul later wrote, “For by Grace you are saved, through faith; and that (the salvation package) *is* not of yourselves; *it is not of works* lest any man should boast.”⁶

They said therefore to Him, “What then do You do for a sign that we may see and believe You? What work do you perform?”

Understanding that when Jesus said “believe in Him,” He was referring to Himself, they asked for a miracle that would be a sign that would prove He was telling the truth. The following statement is a reference to the sign they wanted.

Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness

Fourteen hundred years earlier, their forefathers had been led by Moses out of Egyptian slavery. During their forty year trek through the desert the Israelites had been miraculously fed by a mysterious wafer like substance that appeared on the ground every morning. They had named it manna which is the Hebrew for “What is it?”

as it is written,

It is written in the Holy Scriptures.

“HE GAVE THEM BREAD OUT OF HEAVEN TO EAT.”

The people quoted a passage from Psalm 78 to Jesus. From Jesus’ response they seem to have taken verse 24 to mean that it was Moses who provided the manna. Yet the Psalm clearly states that it was the LORD who rained down the food from heaven.

“To appreciate the significance of this allusion to the manna, it must be borne in mind that there was a general belief, more or less explicit, that Messiah when He came would outdo Moses, the great national hero of Israel, in the wonders which he would accomplish. Thus there was a rabbinical saying: “The former redeemer caused manna to descend for them; in like manner shall our latter redeemer cause manna to come down.”⁷

Thus the sign they wanted to see was bread actually descending from heaven and therefore the multiplication of the normal bread the day before was not a sufficient sign.

Jesus therefore said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven,

Jesus corrected their interpretation of the Psalm. It was the LORD Who had given their forefathers (“you”) the manna.

⁶ Ephesians 2:8. “That” is the translation of the Greek neuter demonstrative pronoun τοῦτο. Both the Greek words for “grace” and “faith” are feminine nouns. Thus “that” does not refer back to either noun but stands for the entire salvation package provided not by ourselves or by our good works but by God. In verse 9, St. Paul goes on to say that we were created to do good works. However the performance of good works is not the requirement for salvation, the performance of good works is the result of salvation, God working His works through us (Philippians 2:13). St. James makes the point that our faith is shown by our good works. If good works are absent there is reason to doubt the faith (James 2:20). Jesus also made this point when He said “By their fruits (works) you shall know them” (See Matthew 7:15-20).

⁷ Bernard, p. 194. J. B. Lightfoot is being quoted who in turn is quoting *Midrash Koheleth*, p. 73.

but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven.

The verb for the giving of the manna in Moses' day is past tense. Jesus used the present on-going tense for the giving of the "true bread out of heaven." The true bread from heaven—the sign they were demanding—was standing right in front of them!

For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world."

Jesus of course is referring to Himself. His purpose in coming from heaven and taking on our humanity was to provide life by giving His life on the Cross for all. He took our sin penalty, death, that we might have eternal life.

This life is not just reserved for a particular nation, such as the Jews, but is for "the world," the entire human race.

They said therefore to Him, "Lord, evermore give us this bread."

According to Bernard, the physical manna had already been interpreted by Jewish commentators as a type or a symbol of future spiritual bread.⁸ So the crowd had no problem with accepting the concept that the bread, which Jesus would somehow deliver to them from heaven, would be bread that nourished their souls, rather than their bodies.

However, Bernard's suggestion would seem to necessitate that the crowd seeking Jesus at this time consisted of scribes and Pharisees or others interested in scholarly pursuits, who might be familiar with the philosophy of Philo or the rabbinical discussions.⁹ This seems highly unlikely in a crowd from Galilee, a region generally disdained by the elite of Jerusalem.

More probable, the people misunderstood Jesus and thought He was offering physical bread like manna, but that, unlike manna, it would not be perishable. Addressing Him with respect (Lord) they asked for a perpetual supply of this bread.

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.

Jesus identified Himself as the 'bread of life.' 'Bread of life' is used as a metaphor for the One Who gives and sustains life. They must come to Him and they must believe in Him. If they do, they will find that He is completely sufficient to support the needs of their spirit.

The Israelites who were fed the manna in the wilderness were also supplied with miraculous water when they were thirsty. That water, too, did not last. But just as Jesus promised enduring bread, He also promised enduring water¹⁰. Jesus identified His enduring "water" as the Holy Spirit residing in the believer.¹¹

But I say to you, that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe.

The crowd had quoted Psalm 78 when they mentioned the manna. Yet Psalm 78 recounts the fact that their forefathers who were fed with the manna "did not believe in God, and did not trust in His salvation."¹²

⁸ Philo, a contemporary of St. Paul, used manna as a spiritual type frequently. Bernard, p. 196.

⁹ The Apostle Paul, for example, allegorized the manna and the water in 1 Corinthians 10:3-4, but he was a highly educated Pharisee, and was certainly familiar with the rabbinical commentators, and probably with the writings of Philo as well.

¹⁰ John 4:14

¹¹ John 7:38-39

¹² Psalm 78:22.

The Israelites had been miraculously brought out of Egypt. God had saved them from the Egyptian army by parting the ‘Red’ Sea¹³ for them to cross on dry land. God guided them through the desert with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Yet having seen all these miracles, the Israelites did not believe or trust God.

Even so, these people have seen the miracles of Jesus, yet they are just like their unbelieving forefathers.

All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me,

However, there are some who will believe. They are the ones that the Father gives to our Lord. But who are they?

The prophet Isaiah records that the LORD God calls all men to Himself. “Incline your ear and come to Me; listen, that you may live;” He promises to make an everlasting covenant with those who respond to His call. Covenants or legal contracts in those days were ratified by the blood of a sacrifice. In the same way, the covenant of God¹⁴ was ratified by the death of Jesus Christ.

Therefore the ones who respond to the call of the Father are the ones He gives to Jesus Christ for salvation. If the Father did not call, no one could come.¹⁵ But He does call and all may come because it is not His wish that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.¹⁶ Sadly, not all listen to the call and many, who do hear, do not respond.

and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.

The words “certainly not” are the strongest form of negative. He will absolutely NEVER cast out the one who comes to Him. On the contrary He welcomes those who come.

For I have come down from heaven

The One named Jesus did not have His origin in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He did not have an origin at all. We read in the first chapter of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . . and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, the glory of the unique (only one of His kind) God, full of grace and truth.”¹⁷

not to do My own will, but the will of Him Who sent Me.”

The ‘will’ that Jesus always followed was that of the Father.¹⁸

The will of the Father is stated by Jesus, “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.”¹⁹

¹³ This was probably not the Red Sea, but the Sea of Reeds.

¹⁴ We call the second part of the Bible the New Testament because it gives the history of the New Testament of God. This New Testament is the legal contract ratified by the death of Christ on the Cross that guarantees our salvation. This is what Jesus was referring to at the Last Supper when He blessed the cup and said “for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.” The pouring out or the shedding of His blood on the Cross ratified God’s covenant of Salvation.

¹⁵ In John 6:44 Jesus is quoted as saying: “No one can come to Me, unless the Father Who sent Me draws him Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me.”

¹⁶ 2 Peter 3:9.

¹⁷ John 1:1 and 14

¹⁸ For a discussion of the Armenian Church’s position on the ‘will’ of Christ, see Karekin Sarkissian, *The Council of Chalcedon and the Armenian Church* (New York: The Armenian Church Prelacy, 1965).

APPLICATION

We Armenians love food and our cuisine, if not *the best*, is one of the best in the world. It remains a part of the culture even when Armenians forget their beloved language and communicate with each other in the language of their country of residence. Armenians do not forget pilaf!

Yet, our reading today teaches us that as important as physical food is, the food that Jesus has promised us is far more necessary. Our lives on this earth are relatively short compared to eternity. Yet most of us think about and plan for our meals that sustain our lives here and never give a moment's thought to the more important food that actually gives us eternal life.

This is the way in which the crowd that followed Jesus acted. They were interested in physical food, and even more, they were interested in *miraculous* physical food. They thought that Jesus promised to give them physical food that would never spoil. Moreover they thought Jesus would give them this food in an unending supply. What a deal!

Wrong! Ever since mankind was barred from the Garden of Eden for disobedience, we have had to work by the sweat of our brow for our physical food. Jesus did not promise to alter that rule for them or for us. True, in another passage He taught us that we should not *worry* about our food supply; He would see that we get what we need. But he never said we would not have to do our part.

God did not come down from heaven, and take on Himself our humanity, just to give us physical bread. Why should He do that! From His benevolence, humans have been plowing, and sowing, and reaping, and grinding and baking bread for thousands of years. God did not need to become a human being to guarantee us physical bread. No, no, He came down to do for us what we could *never* do for ourselves. He came down to save us from our sins, and to give us eternal life. He could only do that by becoming a man.

God is living. He is the source of all life. His life is eternal and He wants us to have eternal life too. We can only have eternal life if we are with Him, not barred from His Presence. When we are shut out of His Presence, our life-line is cut off, and we are spiritually dead. Our sins shut us out of His Presence. Jesus came down out of heaven to fix that situation. When He died for our sins on the Cross, He took away our sins and enabled us to be once again with Him. He will sustain our spiritual life, like food sustains our physical life. He can do this because He rose from the dead and is alive forevermore. What do we need to do to qualify for this eternal life that He offers to us? Jesus said we must come to Him and believe in Him.

What does that mean? What does “come to Him” mean? First of all, this is not a physical act, and we do not have to go to a physical place. God is Spirit, and coming to Him is a

¹⁹ John 6:40.

spiritual act. Coming to Him means we want Him in our life, like we want food when we are dying of hunger, like we want water when we are dying from thirst. He is all important to us. We want to slip our hand in His, and be led by Him. So in our hearts, in our innermost being, we go to Him.

What does 'believe in Him' mean? St. James in his New Testament letter wrote: "Even the devils believe and tremble!" The devils are not saved. What Jesus is asking us to do is not what the devils do, which is simply to believe that He exists. They KNOW He exists, and they tremble in terror. What Jesus is asking us to do, is to believe, with trust, that He really does love us, and has made the sacrifice on the Cross in order that we might live with Him forever. Jesus Christ has done all the work and offers us life as a free gift.

Somehow we hesitate. Is it because this message is too good to be true? So we think, no, what Jesus said cannot be really true; I'd better try to clean up my life and make myself acceptable to God. If I'm good enough He will accept me. The truth is, no matter how good we are, we will never be good enough for God to accept us on that basis. John tells us that we can only come to God through Jesus Christ. That means we must accept the requirement that Jesus has laid down. We must come to Him—submit to Him the control of our life. We must believe, with trust in Him, that He really does love us, and paid for all our sins on the Cross. There simply is no other way.

Physical food lasts for a few hours, it sustains physical life briefly, and then we must acquire more. Physical life lasts at most eighty or ninety years, maybe a hundred. Many of us die a lot sooner. Yet we spend so much time thinking about our next meal, and even fill our prayers with requests to meet our physical needs. Enduring life is spiritual. For this enduring life we need only God Himself.

On this special day, the Sunday of the Catechumens—a Sunday for those drawn to our Christ, those seeking to learn and understand our Faith—we need to think seriously about the offer Jesus has made to us. Our very life depends on it—our eternal life. May God help us all to understand His offer, and to accept with thanksgiving, this wonderful gift of Life.