

Bible study on John 6.24-35

Begin with an opening prayer

O God, giver of manna from heaven,
you provided for Moses' followers in the desert.
O Christ, bread of life,
you fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish.
O Holy Spirit of the living God,
here with us as we come together today,
we ask you to feed us with all that we need,
and that, thus fed, we might be satisfied.
Amen.

Read the passage

Consider different ways to read the text. For example, hearing it in more than one version of the Bible.

Explore and respond to the text

Start by reading the Bible notes below. You may want to read them more than once, or pause after each paragraph to reflect on what you have read.

Bible notes

In verse 22, we are told that the crowd notice that Jesus didn't go with the disciples. Yet they cross the water to catch up with him. Curious...but consistent with the question of verse 25. Jesus dodges the question. After all, the answer – 'I walked across the lake' – might have led to an even greater clamour for him to be their king and lead rebellion against Rome. Instead, Jesus opens a debate on eating in the wilderness and the issue of what the bread of life is and where it is found. What Jesus did on the other side of the lake (feeding the five thousand) filled only their bellies. What they should be seeking is rather more spiritual sustenance that will give them a taste of the kingdom. 'Eternal life' (literally, 'the life of the ages') is John's repeatedly used term for the 'kingdom of God' as favoured by the Synoptics. It emphasises quality rather than quantity: the life of God and God's reign rather than the life of this earth and its rulers. 'Son of Man' is a rare term in John's Gospel. It is used 12 times and always in the context of Jesus' sacrifice and authority. The crowd respond by wanting to know what

they must do, when Jesus has been talking about what is a gift, the bread. The work we are called on to do is simply to believe (v.29). Incredibly, this is met by the crowd saying, 'What sign are you going to give us then?' (v.30). This is the crowd that ate a banquet from a single packed lunch, that followed Jesus across the lake because of that banquet, and they are asking him for a sign? They have seen Jesus perform a wondrous work and yet they ask what work he will do. Then they tell him that they know a story of something similar that happened to other people, namely their ancestors eating manna in the wilderness.

It is Jesus who brings Moses into the conversation – probably to compare and contrast him and the great leader who freed the people from slavery and led them through the wilderness. He does so by pointing out that Moses didn't actually do anything – God did. More than that, God was doing it again, here, and now, giving bread from heaven as he did after the exodus. And the crowd want it. And Jesus says, it's me! It is the first of the seven so-called 'I am' sayings: 'I am the bread of life' (v.35) – provided you don't count Jesus' answer to the Samaritan woman, 'I am he' (4.26), and his response to the disciples in the boat (6.20 – see NRSV footnote). Naturally, such a statement is going to raise a lot more questions; so this encounter is in no way finished.

Reflection

Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.

The action in John 6 has shifted from a feeding miracle to an increasingly heated argument over what it means. The scene has shifted from one side of the lake to the other, and we sense the conversation is narrowing down to one between Jesus and the Pharisees (those John usually refers to as 'the Jews'). The conversation raises questions about the link between experience – what we see and hear and touch – and what we read in the Bible. How does the one interpret or inform the other? In the temptation story, Jesus said that people don't live on bread alone but also on the word of God. What light does this dialogue throw on those words?

Questions for reflection

You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss the theme.



- The artist's title is: 'St Therese doing the dishes' – what do you see?
- What might be the works of God you are being called to do?
- What would you ask Jesus about what God wants for you?

Prayer

A prayer of thanksgiving

Thank you, Lord, that we can trust you in all things.
Even when we don't understand,
when we feel lost and alone, we can trust you.
When we wander in the wilderness,
thank you that you are there by our side,
that you reach out and touch us with outstretched, open arms.
Thank you, Lord, that we are safe with you.
For you provide all we need,
that which is 'on earth' and that which is eternal.
Amen.

A prayer to end the Bible study

As we seek to do what you want, Lord,
may we bring bread to the hungry –
food for bodies and food for souls,
strength for the journey, and hope for the future.
In Jesus' name.
Amen.