

Salvation and the Spirit

John 6:35-51
August 13, 2006

I.

Today we come to the Gospel of John, and since this is the first time that I have preached at St. Thomas on John's Gospel I would like to make a brief introductory statement about the readings that we hear each Sunday.

You all know that the Gospels of our Lord Jesus Christ are presented in many Protestant churches according to a three year cycle; years A, B, and C. The readings during Year A usually are from Matthew. That was last year. This year is Year B, and we hear Mark's Gospel. Year C is for Luke's Gospel, which is next year.

A three year cycle means there is no year for the fourth Gospel; the Gospel of John. However, because Mark's Gospel, the one assigned for this year, is shorter than Matthew's or Luke's, it is convenient during this time to include some material from John so that it is read in church.

To some extent the cycle of readings is organized this way because John's Gospel is so different in tenor, style, and theology from the other three. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are quite similar, and are called the "Synoptic Gospels" because many of the stories and teachings in one are repeated, often in similar language, in the others.

The Gospel of John is notably different. While all four Gospels are consistent on basic themes of Christian faith, John's Gospel is a more spiritually oriented story that emphasizes Christ's birth as the revelation of God incarnate, and it presents Christ's death as his glorification. It has what theologians call an exceptionally high Christology, which means an elevated and exalted view of the nature and person of Christ.

John, more so than the other gospels, emphasizes how Jesus descended from heaven to the cross to save humanity, and then returned to the Father in glory. His miracles are described as signs of God's power, and everything about Jesus is presented in a majestic way that goes beyond the other three Gospels. As you read from John you might notice a theological intensity not present in the same way the other three.

Why is that? One answer might be found at the end of John's Gospel when Jesus was on the cross and was about to die. You might recall what he did just before he gave up his spirit.

John and Jesus' mother, Mary, were standing together near the cross with some of the others, and Jesus basically committed his mother to John's care. Jesus looked at Mary, and referring to John he said, "Woman, behold your son." Then he looked at John and, referring to Mary, said "Behold your mother." And in the next verse we learn that from that moment John took Mary into his home (19:26-27).

So, we see that the Gospel of John was written by the man who knew Jesus' mother. Even the Catholic Church, which holds that Mary was bodily assumed into heaven, recognizes that she first lived out her years on earth.

If we believe that John did what Jesus told him to do, then we accept that he took care of Mary after Jesus died. She lived with John, perhaps she washed, cleaned, and cooked for him, and he probably protected and supported her. The adoption of each by the other at the foot of the cross likely tied them together until she died.

We don't know how long this went on, but they must have spent a lot of time together. Can you imagine what they talked about in private moments? What kind of stories could Mary

have told? Mary certainly had a special understanding of Jesus that no one else in the world could have had, and she was in a position to share that with John as time passed by.

John must have been amazed by the things she could tell. No wonder his Gospel is different. Although he, like Matthew, Mark, and Luke, was writing from a perspective of either being an eyewitness to events or else knowing disciples who were, he also had a special perspective available to no one else. Part of his research came from the mother of our Lord herself.

This does not mean that the other three Gospels are less important. They are all equally vital to our faith, and the three synoptic Gospels contain much about how we are called to live our lives in anticipation of the coming of God's kingdom that is not found in the Gospel of John.

But imagine how the insights John gained through his time with Mary must have shaped his understanding in ways that were unique, and that gave him a special knowledge of our Lord and Savior that he then imparted to us.

II.

So, with that as more background that I intended to give, let's look at today's reading. Chapter six of John, where today's reading and next week's readings are to be found, is the Eucharistic part of John's Gospel in which he made some very strong statements.

For example, you recall that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all ended their stories of the Last Supper with various descriptions of the cup, the bread, and the Eucharistic words. John did not do that. He focused only on Jesus' washing of the disciples feet and his betrayal by Judas.

This is because in John's view there was no single one-time event that instituted the Eucharist. Rather, John, perhaps influenced by Mary, saw Jesus' entire life as representing the Eucharist. This likely is why John gave such significance to Jesus' words when he said "I am the bread of life." "Whoever believes in me shall have eternal life."

III.

The essence of Jesus' message today is in his use of bread as a metaphor to describe the reason he came to live among us. Just as through earthly bread we receive bodily nourishment and a healthy life in this world, Jesus said that through him we may find spiritual nourishment and eternal life in the next world.

Today's Gospel calls us, as God's people, to reach out and take the bread he offers. And it similarly calls the church, as Christ's body, to reach out and do the same.

If we, individually, do not partake of that bread as Jesus would have us do, we lead sick and undernourished lives and have no hope for eternity. And if the Church, as a community, does not also fully partake of that bread, we have a sick and undernourished Christianity .

This is what Jesus meant when he said "I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." He was proclaiming that his mission was from God for the purpose of giving himself to us. He was offering us the opportunity to know eternal joy and happiness, and to live forever in the presence of God.

The bottom line is that Jesus basically was saying no less than he had come down from heaven by the will of God in order to offer everlasting life to those who come to him.

And for first century Jews this was an incredible claim. One wonders about the extent to which this clear emphasis on Jesus' divinity came from John's association with Mary. Whether or not

there is such a connection, however, there is no doubt that John accepted Jesus as holy and divine, and able to do heavenly things.

IV.

This idea of the bread of life also leads to a consideration of the alternative. If Jesus is the bread of life, is there also a bread of death? What did Satan say to Jesus when he tempted him in the desert? When Jesus was hungry, Satan appeared and said "if you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." If Jesus had done so, what kind of bread would that have been?

Satan bakes this kind of bread today and offers it to us in attractive wrappings. It is the opposite of Jesus' bread which satisfies our hunger. Instead of satisfying us, this bread of death makes us hungrier instead of satisfied.

This bread of death is evident in addictions, in the desires of people to glorify themselves, and in excessive devotion to material things where people can be consumed by greed, vanity, and pride as they consume them. In our affluent consumer oriented society people seek these things and are never satisfied, but rather are driven to seek them all the more.

Instead of partaking of them, people end up being devoured by them, producing physical death, spiritual death, destruction of families, and subversion of a sense of purpose in life. Addictions are a clear example of the bread of death. Instead of being satisfied, the hunger for this type of evil bread only increases, creating a never ending cycle from which there is no escape without help.

Jesus, however, tells us that in him as the heavenly bread of life, we can escape the sure and certain fate of partaking of the worldly bread of death. If we turn away from the world, and if we die to ourselves as Paul says in Romans and acknowledge that our sins were crucified with him, then we truly can know Jesus as the bread of life.

And if we do come to Jesus in that way, today's Gospel makes clear that he will receive us, no matter what, and we will not be lost. We can live in the blessed assurance that he will raise us up on the last day.

V.

And here is where today's Gospel gets a tricky because it tells us we have a problem. Jesus makes clear that we are totally incapable of coming to him on our own. Even though he said that he is the bread of life, we cannot partake of that bread merely in our own strength.

At verse 44 Jesus said that no one can come to him unless drawn by the Father. What does this mean? Some religious traditions treat this as clear evidence of predestination; that some people are the elect of God, and some are not. They would say that God, by his grace, has determined in advance who can be saved and who cannot, and there is nothing on this earth we can do to change that eternal and divine decision.

I do not believe that, and the Episcopal Church has not subscribed to that view of predestination. We do recognize, however, that the capacity to believe in Jesus does not result purely from human effort; it is a divine work. We recognize that we cannot truly believe in the saving grace of Jesus Christ unless by God's grace through the Holy Spirit we are drawn to do so.

But we also do not believe that the decision about our salvation was made before we were born. We understand that God's grace can work on us during our lives to bring us to faith. To say otherwise would limit God's power, which cannot be done.

So, for those who do believe, for those who through all the trials and tribulations of life have ended up here as believers, it is not just because you did it on your own. For those whose journeys over the roads of earth have led them to this place, it was not entirely your own doing. And for those who have not yet made that decision to partake of the bread of life, if they eventually do so, it will be because God, through the Holy Spirit, has drawn them to Jesus.

There is no doubt that salvation comes to us through God's grace. And one of the acts of grace that makes salvation possible for all who truly seek it is the sending of the Holy Spirit to show them the way. It is through the Spirit that we can be drawn to Jesus within the meaning of today's gospel. If we truly seek the Spirit we will know the way to our eternal hope.

VI.

The Catechism of the Episcopal Church tells us that eternal life means "a new existence, in which we are united with all the people of God, in the joy of fully knowing and loving God and each other."

It is important to note that there is nothing in that doctrine that limits the beginning of our new existence to the time after we die. In fact, today's Gospel promises that Jesus will satisfy our spiritual hunger now, and that he will quench our spiritual thirst now, if we only come to him and believe.

In this sense, our eternal life has already begun. It began when we were transformed by God through the Holy Spirit and drawn to Christ. Jesus assures us that having come to him he will not turn us away, and that indeed we will be raised up on the last day. *Amen*