

## John 6:1-21<sup>vii viii</sup>

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid."

Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

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## vii **About John 6:1-21**

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle of Jesus' ministry recorded in all four gospels. John's account seems to come from a tradition independent of, but parallel to, the other accounts. As so often emphasized in John, Jesus takes the initiative, even before the people arrive (1:38, 4:7, 5:6, 6:5).

John looks at the miracle from a three-dimensional perspective. He recalls the past by alluding to Moses and the feeding of the Israelites with manna in the wilderness (6:5, 12, 31; Exodus 16:4, 16) and, secondarily, to Elijah (1 Kings 17:8-16) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:42-44). He recalls the present by the mention of the celebration of the Passover (6:4).

The future is implied both by references to the Christian eucharistic meal, where the actions "took...given thanks...distributed" are the same as those described by Paul (1 Corinthians 11:23-24), and by pointing to the great messianic banquet (Revelation 19:9).

Jesus' instructions to the disciples to "gather up...that nothing may be lost" (v. 12) anticipate later statements about his ministry (11:52, 17:12, 18:9). The people's response to the sign is the desire to acclaim Jesus as "the prophet" (v. 14, the prophet-like-Moses, 1:21, 4:19; Deuteronomy 18:15). But this popular pressure causes Jesus to withdraw, for he does not seek this kind of political leadership.

## viii **Reflection and Response**

When we consider the daunting number of people who hunger today, not only for bread but also for dignity, meaning, and happiness, we might ask the same question Jesus did: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"

It's a trick question, as John implies with his parenthetical comment. The things which most satisfy our deepest hungers can't be purchased. Still on the literal plane, Philip despairs: no amount of money could assuage the vast crowd's hunger. (While they may well be physically hungry, remember that they followed him initially because of his compassion toward the sick.) Jesus' silence directs us to look toward our own resources.

The child's lunch box and the mother who probably packed it are a delightful reminder that "those who

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would be a blessing for others must bring what they possess to Jesus.” Without a scoff, a snicker or a doubt, Jesus takes the bread and fish into his hands with all confidence. Ignoring Andrew’s concern about scarcity, he provides an abundance. His action reassures those of us who deem our efforts too meager or skimpy to ever count as ministry, or to have any significant effect within God’s design. Instead we can count it, as did St. Ignatius of Loyola, “a toweringly wonderful thing that you might call me to follow you and stand with you.”

The miracle adds a new dimension to the picture of God given in Psalm 145. There, the people look hopefully to God as the source of their food. The opening of God’s hand satisfies their desires. In light of John’s gospel, we enter more directly into that process. No longer does God stand on one side of an abyss and we on the other. Now, Jesus takes our barley loaves into his hands and blesses them. In a co-creative act, we bring the food, share it with Jesus and each other, then gather the left-overs.

Those who are, as Ephesians calls us, one in body and spirit, cannot blame God for world hunger, neglected children and all our other social ills. For God has called us to partnership, graced our efforts, and made us abundant blessings for each other.