

Pentecost 9 Year B

Okay, just as we get going in Mark... this is year B after all, Mark's year... just as we get a head of steam on Mark, the lectionary gurus switch us to the gospel of John... For me it's like theological whiplash... the gospel of John and the gospel of Mark being decidedly different points of view... I don't know why the powers that be switched the reading... maybe John's narrative is a little more literary... maybe it is because John always makes a definitive theological point about the person of Jesus.... John's theology is seemingly more overt than Mark's... Mark's gospel, as terse and succinct as it is, is more subtle and nuanced.... Anyway, whatever the reason, the preacher has to abruptly switch gears, that is, if the preacher is serious about making meaning of these ancient passages in their proper context.

So here's what I want to do, a brief bible study: We'll look briefly at this passage from John... the high points, and then we'll look at this same narrative in Mark... often there is something to gain by the contrast of point of view in the gospels.... First... and scholars argue over this... the writers of John... and we believe that John was a collaborative enterprise... first, it is apparent that John knew the story of the feeding of the five thousand probably from Mark... since Mark was written some twenty plus years before John's gospel was compiled... Or, it is possible that Mark and John had a common older source... or the story of the multiplication of loaves was passed along word of mouth... But to be sure this motif of feeding is in the tradition of Hebrew scripture... this passage a gloss of the feeding story of Elijah. The story is in the air, as it were, as to the rapidly developing lore in the first century of the phenomenon of Jesus of Nazareth.... In any case, these two author's Mark and John have their own respective agendas in telling this story... a story that has inspired art and literature over the ages... so first, John.

John, as you would know, is all about Christology, that is the theological nature of the Christ... we know that is what this gospel is about because that is what the prologue is about... and Aristotle in his Poetics teaches us that in Greek rhetoric, which is what this is, that the prologue prefigures the theme of the rhetorical piece... In John's prologue we are presented a poetic reverie as to the nature of Christ.' In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God. He was in the beginning with God... all things came into being through him.... In him was life and the life was the light of all people... and this word became flesh and lived among us full of grace and truth.... So John sets the stage for a theological treatise as to the person of Christ.... And the way he fleshes this out, so to speak,

is through the high metaphorical so-called “I am” sayings... I am the good shepherd... I am the gate... I am vine... I am the doorway... and here, though it is not included in our reading today, but follows immediately after.... I am bread... I am bread who comes down from heaven... and then Jesus goes further... “this bread is my flesh... the wine we drink is my blood” ... of course, the disciples are dismayed by this teaching... its impertinent radicalism... they’re offended... grossed out, in short.... John is of course speaking metaphorically... using the language of myth... John is the more spiritualized rendering of the story of Jesus, with emphasis on his divinity... in fact, in the early church such emphasis almost kept John’s gospel out of the canon of scripture.... Think of the gospel of John as a byzantine mosaic... stylized, beautiful, mysterious... a beguiling window into the ether... an imaginative glimpse into the eternal. And I would say that we in the west have mostly depended on John for our hybridized theology... we have projected Jesus into the heavens, an unearthly deity wholly apart from ourselves... we like to say that Jesus is among us, but I’m not so sure we believe it.... And yet this gospel speaks of Jesus as the ultimate truth made human... the bread come down to earth from heaven... that the way of Jesus is nurture... the only nurture.

Mark is coming at this awareness from a quite different point of view... Mark’s gospel lack’s philosophical language... Mark doesn’t speculate as to the person of Christ. Mark is all about the action... Jesus’ life and teaching and ministry to the weak and outcast.... His obsessive practice of hospitality... Jesus is a symbol, a mythological figure for Mark, just as he is in John, but Mark lets the symbol speak for itself... Mark allows the narrative of Jesus’ life and ministry to speak for itself.... Mark is of the Socratic school in which the teaching is all about imitation... In fact, that is how we learn... any parent can tell you that children don’t respond to “do as I say.” They do respond to what we do... that’s a little scary! Mark’s gospel is a narrative of a way of life that we are called to imitate.... And as you have heard me say countless times before, Mark is not concerned with a coming utopian future, but with how we live now. Mark’s gospel is direct instruction on how to live the way of God’s kingdom, now, on this earth.... This is a story of the baptized and how it is that we are to live... now... today.

So, having said all that, I want to get to the heart of this feeding story according to Mark. Mark makes two decisive points about this story of the loaves and fish that John doesn’t make. We are told according to Mark that Jesus ordered all the people, the people harried, like sheep without a shepherd, we are told... The people are made to sit down in groups... the word in the Greek is

symposia... the word from which we get symposium... and symposium is defined as a "drinking party"... I'm not making this up... a party in which the participants engage in enlightened conversation... this isn't about given people a sack lunch and sending them on their way... this is a proper meal in which there is enlightened conversation and fun, and joy... like a dinner party... in which the participants relate to one another... There is dignity in such a gathering... dignity the principal dynamic between host and guest in which the participants are not only nourished with food, but with relationship and personhood... A proper meal is much more than food... it is about the gathering of hosts and guests in which all are equals... That is the paradigm I think for our serving the poor of our world... not a hand out... but relationship and mutual respect and making a space for personhood... After a meal one doesn't forget the names of those at the table... the sharing of a meal is about sharing food and it is about sharing our humanity... and that is transformative, and empowering... And that is not just a symbol of the kingdom of God... that is the kingdom of God.

The other point, no less important, is that Jesus is not the one who does the feeding... Who does the feeding? He tells the disciples... you give them something to eat... this isn't about Jesus except that Jesus is the one we imitate... this is about you as the people of God bringing the kingdom to bear.... Which is to effect nurture and dignity and well-being... not in the abstract, but a reality present in every shared meal and every gracious conversation.

Yesterday at the consecration of our new bishop, I was moved a number of times in the service, but I was perhaps moved the most at the opening procession.... the procession of bishops, priests, laypersons, guests, servers... a symbol of our walk of faith... that this journey we are on as people of faith is noble and worth celebrating.

Brothers and sisters we are that kid with the five loaves and two fish, all that we have... a meagre offering we think.... But the offering is everything... and the message, the truth is that it will be enough.... Such is the way of love.... Love is always enough and more.... So let us gather... gather, the hungry and the lost and the least.... Let us invite them to the table for a proper meal.... There is nothing more to the kingdom of God than that... and that is enough... that is quite enough.