



SUNDAY SERMON

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Today's Gospel text could be understood as a controversy. True, the misunderstandings between Jesus and the crowd in "Galilee of the heathen" are innumerable, as are those between him and his fellow Jews. You can also observe the misunderstandings between his initial students and the far smaller group that starts to separate from the rest and manifest itself: the disciples who remain. For they may have been chosen, but they have to confirm that choice again and again. All those different players are the context of this text in which Jews – disciples or not – are addressed. But the master does not allow himself to be drawn into this polarizing manner of thinking, and recalls the prophet Isaiah (54:13): "It is written in the prophets: they will all be taught by God (*didaktoi theou*)" (6:45a).

The didactic skill of Jesus is that he sees his way to bend the polemics into an instructive discourse. In other words, he bends the monologue of always wanting to be proved right into a dialogue. Still differently: he can curve the stubborn urge to remain stuck in the familiar, in saying "*is this not Jesus, son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know all too well?*" or "*isn't he one of us?*" into the upright question of the un-knowing crowd.

Another thought: it can be a gift to grow old and still be conscious that you have not "seen it all", have not understood all of life and experienced everything ... that you can still find yourself within the movement of descending (*katabaino/y-r-d*) and ascending.

A second pitfall of the preacher is to be allured by the text and use it as an occasion to explain how the Lord's Supper should be understood. Doesn't Jesus himself (in his discourse with his Jewish audience) use the question of the crowd concerning the manna in the desert – bread from Heaven ("as it is written")? The crucial point of the explanation is not that "the living bread that came down from heaven" is a provision for survival, neither is it about a foretaste of eternal life (6:47b) or about immortality. His explanation does not take up the question about the true faith but the upright question about "what must we *do*?" (6:28a). The (ontological) question about the manna: "*what is this?*" (*man hu*, Ex. 16.15) which causes them to get caught in not-knowing (*mah-hu*) becomes bent towards the knowledge of *how* they should deal with it. Apparently one does not have to know the substance or essence in order to deal well – and above all modestly – with it.

"*Do this in remembrance of me*" is the instruction of Jesus (Lk. 22:19). – Remembering is apparently not only a matter of words but also of action. Though we do not only remember by hear-say but also because "it is written". It is a matter of doing, of exercise. The same applies to listening, which is contrary to our capacity to grumble ...

“not that any man has seen the Father” (6:46a) Jesus says in John’s gospel – after having pointed out that to him/her who hears the Word of God and learns it, makes it his own (v. 45, *mathoon*), it shall be given to encounter HIM. The process of moving in order to approach Jesus is apparently sufficient for the moment. He is Immanu-El.

But where do we go wrong? It is where we speak continually *about God* instead of allowing ourselves to being spoken to *by God*. In that way we’ll never become God-learned people (“divines” says the English!). In “speaking about” we often have the last word and consequently the right will always be on our side. But Jesus leads us in a different direction. He listens to me and as such HE is often incomprehensible for me. Probably because in doing so he comes too close to me, in Word and (!) Gesture.

Probably I do understand him more than is dear to me, but I cannot let it happen. I want to understand *before* acting – confusing that attitude with acting responsibly.

Does the way of questioning in this text appeal to us? Do we ask ourselves (like the crowd) “what shall we do?” (6:28); do we ask each other (like the fellow-citizens) “don’t we know him and his family all too well?” or do we conclude: “what is taught here really is indigestible!” (*skleros*) “who can accept it?”(vs. 60).

What we have to do apparently depends of the role given to us – a role that defines the character of the question.

To read the gospel according to John in the context of the Exodus story (instead of 1 Kings 19) shows us that the LORD allows himself to be tested – even if that way of testing takes on the provocative character of grumbling. Nevertheless, one is given meat for the evening and bread for the morning: “Then you will know that I AM the Lord your God” (Ex. 16:12).

And Moses said: “This is the bread the Lord has given you to eat; this is the word that the Lord has ordered” (16:15b-16a). The ordered Word and the given Bread belong to each other. In both ways God comes to meet us (*katabaino*): ordering and (self-)giving. Clearly HE wants to be among us even when messianic times have not yet arrived.

In doing so we shall learn and acknowledge – in a measured way (*omer!*) – according to a God-given measure that may not be curtailed by our own human measure. For according to that measure we also will be tested: the Lord’s Supper is a test-case because it is a *mitzvah*.

And as such it is a *given*. I sincerely hope that – after this special week – we all are sated. All of us have a role, learned and less-learned, but all ready to keep learning.

Decades ago Joachim Jeremias (*Abendmahls Worte*; 227) cited a Talmud tractate (*b.Berachot* 64a) which can encourage us: “Everyone who enjoys a meal where a learned man (woman) is present is like someone who has eaten of the splendour of the Shechinah” It may be clear that the kitchen of Haus Ohrbeck cannot compete with those demands, although it has contributed in its own way to the *Shechinah*. For if God pitches his tent (*eskenosan*, Joh. 1.14a) among us, abides with us, no sign or reality is too trivial or plain. This is His teaching. He encounters us in all vulnerability. In that way, He makes himself known to us. In that way, He lets us perceive His glory – without measure.

That bread will take its toll once again becomes clear when we witness the bad harvests in the granaries of this world. But the divine ways to give bread “for the life of the world” (*hyper tes tou kosmou zo'es*/ 6.51b) are inexhaustible.

The Lord of the world is incomprehensible – vulnerable – embracing.