



SUNDAY SERMON JOHN 6,30-35

Jo Beckers

With the lectionary of the day our dear Protestant church fathers and mothers did not make things easy for us. It is a combination of texts which are harsh and blunt in their manner of expression: following the phrasing of this pericope, they are good fodder for a theology which replaces Israel: Jesus is the true bread of heaven and therefore second to none in each and every aspect. Full stop!

But is it really that simple and clear? To answer this, we have to take a closer look at the two narratives from Exodus and John's Gospel, and also listen to them very closely. We will realise then that there are some striking similarities and differences, and that we also received sound pointers to a different, more salutary interpretation. As you might have heard before, the readings in German have been taken from the revised Lutheran translation. To me this seems appropriate in this year's 500th anniversary of the German Reformation.

The Evangelist John takes us to the synagogue of Capernaum. A synagogue: the place of learning (Jn 6:59). There, in the midst of study, an argument between Jesus and the people, who followed him across the Sea of Galilee, takes place (v. 24). They have seen the sign of the feeding of the multitude and they want him to be their king, because he *“is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world”* (v. 14; Deut. 18:15). However, the people are not able to come and take him by force. He withdraws again to the mountain and escapes by crossing the lake ... (vv. 15-21).

It is the day after the feeding of the multitude. Shortly before Pesach. And Capernaum is located by this lake which Jesus had walked upon in the darkness of night. It is here in this synagogue that Jesus is challenged, his authority and his origin are questioned. *“What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?”* (v. 30). It is no longer discussed that he has already performed a sign and fed the multitude ... A discussion emerges. *“Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’ (Ps. 78:24)”* (v. 31).

This leads us back to the wilderness, the Desert of Sin, between the twelve springs of Elim and Mount Sinai. The wilderness. Again: A place of learning. But there is evidently no learning without murmuring. The entire community murmurs against Moses and Aaron. *“If only we had died by the hand of the ETERNAL in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread.”* The charge is a significant one: *“for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger”* (Ex 16:3). It is a matter of life and death. A charge ultimately brought forward against God Himself. He appears to be hiding his glory in a cloud (v. 10).

Then the Lord speaks, indeed he speaks to Moses, exclusively to Moses. *"I have heard the complaining of the Israelites"* (v. 12). His words carry the same weight as those uttered when he appeared at the burning bush and told Moses that he had heard the cries of the Israelites about their oppressors (Ex. 3:7). Now Moses is again asked to forward advice on what to do and what not to do. This is a divine test, whether or not the people were following the Torah (Ex. 16:4). And thus Moses says: *"It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: Gather as much of it as each of you needs."* (v. 16). The word and the bread are connected. Hand in hand. Bread is provided – but is the promise kept?

Later, in the book of Deuteronomy, it is said: *"He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD"* (Deut. 8:3). And further: *"This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors"* (Deut. 8:1).

Hence manna is more than just bread: Manna is the knowledge of God. Knowledge which leads towards a life in the land which the Lord has promised to the patriarchs. And again: it is a matter of life and death ... Keeping is punished. Greed is punished. The manna rots and begins to smell ... The wonderful thing is: If everyone only collects what he or she requires, there will be enough for everyone ... *"But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage"* (v. 18).

A second test follows. The people are told to gather the double amount on the sixth day. For everything which remains after the sixth day, is for the holy Sabbath! (vv. 22-23). But despite this promise that the remainder would suffice, *"on the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none"* (v. 27). God concludes: *"How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? See! The LORD has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days (...) So the people rested on the seventh day"* (vv. 28-30).

Manna is a gift. Like the dew, like hoarfrost on the ground, white as milk and sweet as honey (v. 31). Manna is sweet as the Torah (Ps. 19:11), with reference to the life in the promised land; indeed, it constitutes the basis for such a life (Ex. 3:8, 16:35).

And as manna is not only about bread, Jesus is not exclusively about bread. It is a matter of bread, which is a sign for *"every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD"* (Deut. 8:3). It is a matter of Torah: *"it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread of heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world"* (Jn 6:32). Torah, which shows the way ahead into the promised land and which sets out the basis for life in this land. Life in a healed world, in which nothing and nobody gets lost but will be raised up *"on the last day"* (vv. 39-40).

Moses and Jesus are not challenging each other. Both spread the word of God. Indeed, from John's perspective Jesus is the incarnate Word. And he phrases it in the following terms:

*"In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
...
And the Word became flesh
and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth."* (Jn 1:1, 14)

To John, Jesus, who stands in the tradition of these biblical texts, is the incarnate Word. He is the incarnate Torah. And thus Jesus has to say: *“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”* (Jn 6:51).

And obviously there is murmuring. *“Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph?”* (v. 42). *“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”* (v. 52). This murmuring did not only happen back then. It still happens today. Can one say about a human that he is the Son of God? Yes, this can be said about a human. The Evangelists make very clear claims about this. God and Jesus are in a very intimate relationship with one another. So do all legitimate successors of David, every righteous and just king and each one who does what is pleasing in the sight of God. And as God has promised to David through the mouth of Nathan: *“I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.”* (2 Sam. 7:14). Or in Psalm 2, which literally reads: *“You are my son; today I have begotten you”* (Ps. 2:7). Can a relationship between God and a human being possibly be expressed and conceptualised in more intimate terms?!

But let us not forget the sign which Jesus presented. Otherwise the things which he did would be lost. *“Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated”* (v. 11). *“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”* (vv. 12-13). There is a twofold resonance in this. Twelve baskets: As the fragments left over are collected in these, so the entirety of Israel will be collected and the remains will suffice for the God-given Sabbath. And nothing may be lost ...

And we ... We are also tested. We could continue murmuring or waiting for his invitation. The table of the Eucharist is already prepared. Bread and wine are brought up and presented and again Jesus guides us and walks before us. He has gathered us from all different corners, and summons us as we are. And again he will take the bread and the cup and give thanks and invite us to receive the bread, give thanks, break it and share it. Are we joining in? Or rather: Do we dare to go one step further and confess that we are part of creation? That we are the daughters and sons of this one Father, and that we are just like him. In order to eat the bread ourselves, as he did, give thanks and offer ourselves to be eaten. For life in this world. This one world, which is given and entrusted to us by God. In order that it may be healed. In order that nothing and nobody should perish ...

Amen!

Translation: Anna Reuling

Gefördert durch:



aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages