

## Opening John 6 for Preachers Updated 2024

Kieran J. O'Mahony, OSA

### Introduction

Twice in the liturgical year of Mark, the earliest Gospel is supplanted, or rather supplemented, by the Fourth Gospel. This happens for three Sundays in Lent and more extensively during the summer, when the reading of Mark is suspended for no fewer than five Sundays when we read from John chapter 6. This sixth chapter on the Bread of Life presents a challenge familiar to preachers. The purpose of the present article is to open up this chapter of John's Gospel for prayer (*lectio divina*) and, in a practical way, for preaching. I hope to show that this interruption of the Markan cycle is not really a rupture, that the sixth chapter of John repays close attention and finally that it offers a range of rich topics for the preacher to explore with a congregation.

To undertake a responsible reading, it is necessary to begin by looking at John 6 as a whole, before going into the detail. This will include reconstructing the context of the time of writing, touching on the Johannine reception of synoptic traditions and the problems of eucharistic faith and practice in that community. Accordingly, this essay proceeds in four steps:

- A. The Reception of Synoptic Traditions in the Fourth Gospel;
- B. Eucharistic Practice in the Johannine Community;
- C. The Bread of Life Discourse in John 6;
- D. A Close Reading of Each Sunday Gospel followed by Suggestions for Prayer and Preaching.

The last section may be of most practical assistance, but to arrive there requires an exploratory expedition across the terrain of the text!

### A. The Reception of Synoptic Traditions in the Fourth Gospel

It could appear that chapter 6 is made up of quite disparate material and the coherence can be difficult to identify. However, a quite traditional narrative pattern underlies the Johannine text. This can be seen from the lectionary, which allocates the sixth chapter of John in Year B as follows:

(16 <sup>th</sup> Sunday)	Mk 6:30-44	July 21, 2024
(17 <sup>th</sup> Sunday)	Jn 6:1-15	July 29
(18 <sup>th</sup> Sunday)	Jn 6:24-35	August 4
(19 <sup>th</sup> Sunday)	Jn 6:41-51	August 11
(20 <sup>th</sup> Sunday)	Jn 6:51-58	August 18

(21<sup>st</sup> Sunday)

Jn 6:60-69

August 25

(22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday)

Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 September 1

Mark's first account of the multiplication is supplemented every three years by John 6. Mark's second account (the feeding of the four thousand) is simply omitted by the lectionary. However, the sequence in John seems to track Mark's sequence very closely. We catch a glimpse here of the reception of synoptic Gospel material in the Fourth Gospel.<sup>1</sup> Although John's Gospel is often viewed as independent, we can see here how close to synoptic material its author can be.

<b>Sequence</b>	<b>John</b>	<b>Mark</b>
Multiplication for 5000	6:1-15	6:30-44
Walking on the sea	6:16-24	6:45-54
<i>(Skip to what follows in Mark after the second multiplication.)</i>		
Request for a sign	6:25-34	8:11-13
Remarks on bread	6:35-59	8:14-21
Faith of Peter	6:60-69	8:27-30
Passion theme, betrayal	6:70-71	8:31-33

As a consequence, the multiplication is recounted on two successive Sundays (the 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday from Mark and the 17<sup>th</sup> from John) and the faith of Peter is recounted twice (on the 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday from John and on the 24<sup>th</sup> from Mark). So, even outside of John chapter 6, there is a certain repetition in the lectionary.

## **B. Eucharistic Practice in the Johannine Community**

As is well known, the Fourth Gospel does not recount the *Lord's Supper* at the *Last Supper*. It is not that the Gospel is unfamiliar with that tradition or, even less, that the community does not practise the eucharist. From the vocabulary alone in chapter 6, it seems certain that this community not only practises the

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<sup>1</sup> "Synoptic material" because it is not certain that the writer of the Fourth Gospel had before him any texts resembling our canonical first three Gospels. It is commonly recognised that the sequence of the two Feedings and the Walking on the Water in Mark are already highly theological. Cf. F. Neiryneck, *Duality in Mark. Contributions to the Study of Markan Redaction*, (rev. ed. BETL 31, Leuven: Peeters, 1988). A very helpful commentary on this intriguing sequence may be found in Wilfrid Harrington, *Mark* (Dublin: Veritas, 1979), pp. 88-89.

eucharist, but is also quite familiar with the tradition of the Lord's Supper at the Last Supper. In the following composite citation, the relevant words are in italics.

John 6:4 Now the *Passover*, the festival of the Jews, was near. 11 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. 23 Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the *bread* after the Lord *had given thanks*. 48 I am the *bread* of life. 51 I am the living *bread* that came down from heaven. Whoever *eats* of this *bread* will live forever; and the *bread* that I *will give* for the life of the world is my *flesh*." 53 So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you *eat* the *flesh* of the Son of Man and *drink* his *blood*, you have no life in you. 55 for my *flesh* is true food and my *blood* is true *drink*. 64 But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would *betray* him. 71 He was speaking of *Judas son of Simon Iscariot*, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to *betray* him.

In summary, right across chapter 6, the words chosen do recall the Lord's Supper, with the mention of Passover, "took the loaves", "given thanks", "bread of life", "flesh", "blood", "betray", "Judas, son of Simon Iscariot". We may safely conclude that the tradition of the Lord's Supper at the Last Supper is known to this community. However, in a striking way, the writer has removed the *explicit* story from its expected place in the last week of Jesus' life and embedded *implicit* references to it elsewhere in a much earlier moment in the ministry. Why such a drastic technique? Before attempting a reply, a few remarks about the Washing of the Feet in John 13 are necessary.

The Washing of the Feet belongs, from a literary point of view, to a genre known in the scholarly world as *prophetic gesture*.<sup>2</sup> This category has a very respectable pedigree in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, because the prophets themselves were frequently asked to mime their message with some dramatised action or even with a disturbing life-choice.<sup>3</sup> We may add that Jesus' own practice of open table-fellowship was, in its own way, a dramatisation of his Good News about God, in this manner making the message tangible and giving his hearers not only the words about, but also an experience of, God's indiscriminate love. In a different way, the actions and

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<sup>2</sup> A very attractive treatment of Jesus' prophetic actions may be found in: Morna D. Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet. The Prophetic Actions of Jesus*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International Press, 1997). An excellent companion to that book would be: Pierre Simpson, *Do This In Memory of Me. 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them'* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Hosea and Ezekiel provide striking examples.

words with the loaf and cup, at the final meal before his death, also constitute an example of prophetic gesture.<sup>4</sup> This time, the prophetic gesture *interprets* the death *in advance*: the apparent disaster of a far from unusual miscarriage of justice will, against all appearances, be another proclamation of the Good News, a measure of the love of Jesus and therefore of the love of God. The Washing of the Feet is also a prophetic gesture which serves to interpret the death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel.

That the Washing of the Feet is not simply a *moral* example to the disciples emerges from the following observations. (1) The vocabulary used in the account makes the links with the death and resurrection unmistakable. The chief examples are “rose” (thirteen times, almost always in reference to the resurrection and “took off” (lit. laid down, eighteen times, most usually in reference to laying down his life). Associated vocabulary making further allusions would include: water, wash, wipe and feet, all with unexpected links with the story of salvation or the meaning of the lifting up of the Son of Man. (2) The suggestion of understanding “later” is part of a pattern across the Fourth Gospel whereby the disciples are assured that they will really comprehend something only in the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection. This would hardly be necessary if the washing were merely an example of service. (3) In the application of this acted parable, the simple expression “just as” (*kathós*) has an unusual meaning in this Gospel. In a certain number of uses, it takes us beyond a comparison or parallel to a sense of origin. We are not simply invited by the example of Jesus, but rather we are enabled by his prior deed and gift. The best illustrations are: 6:57, read in the light of 20:21; 13:24 and 15:24; 17:21-23. (4) Finally, given the Johannine gift of narrative, it seems to me reasonable to suggest that what we have here is some traditional synoptic material raised, for didactic and theological purposes, to the level of a narrative. The text I have in mind is Mark 10:43-45:

43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Verse 44 and verse 45 are both taken up in the Johannine narrative version of this parabolic saying.<sup>5</sup> For all these reasons, it seems to me that John has created a *tableau* from *synoptic type* material and placed it here in his Gospel. Why? Most probably because there are people attending the eucharist in the Johannine community who fail to make the connection between the religious

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<sup>4</sup> David Stacey, “The Lord’s Supper as Prophetic Drama”, in an appendix in Morna D. Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet. The Prophetic Actions of Jesus*, pp. 80-95.

<sup>5</sup> “For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27) may echo a similar inspiration.

celebration and their practical lives. Given that the only ethic in the Johannine writings is to love, the author of the Fourth Gospel takes this lapse with great earnestness. So much is this the case that he is willing to delete the expected, well-known account of the Lord's Supper and take the radical step of replacing it with his own parabolic narrative, a narrative which moreover has the identical purpose as the action with the bread and wine, with the additional advantage that the link between the celebration and practice is rendered with unavoidable clarity.

In the tradition, John 6 is often regarded as dealing with the eucharistic presence. In particular, the words "my flesh is real food" and "my blood is real drink" are taken to point to the real presence. This seems not to be the case for two reasons. Firstly, eucharistic presence is not reflected upon in the New Testament in general. Even the apparent exception in 1 Corinthians 11 about "recognising the body" is not about recognising the real presence (the *sacramental* body of Christ) but about recognising our brothers and sisters in the Lord (the *corporeal* body of Christ), as the issues and context in Corinth make clear. Secondly and more significantly, John's Gospel regularly uses a technique of crass misunderstanding in order to jolt to reader to another level of understanding. The clearest example is the reaction of Nicodemus: must I go back again into my mother's womb to be born again? Another example is that of the woman at the well, who persists in thinking Jesus is referring to physical water. The same occurs in John 6, when the Jews react to his teaching about eating his flesh: must we eat this man's flesh? Of course not! That would be a gross misunderstanding, as elsewhere in this Gospel. But if that is not the meaning, what is? It may help to ask when does Jesus give himself in the Fourth Gospel? The answer seems to be on the cross - that's when the blood and water come out, as symbols of the gift of new life and the sharing in that gift. When Jesus in the Fourth Gospel talks about giving his flesh for the life of the world, we are propelled towards the core event of salvation: that is when the flesh is real food, and the blood real drink, *at another level*.<sup>6</sup> The later, perfectly understandable, focus on the species of the bread and wine is simply inappropriate in a reconstruction of the concerns at the time of writing. In summary, we *are* dealing with the eucharist in John 6, but *not* with the eucharistic presence as the doctrine evolved and was clarified over time.

Such observations lead me to a question similar to the one posed about chapter 13. What has provoked this particular extended eucharistic reflection in this chapter? A close examination of chapter 6 leads one to suspect that, in addition to a eucharistic motif, there is a more central theme here: the person of Jesus in all scenes and our faith in him. Both themes emerge in the following composite citation:

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<sup>6</sup> Just as this Gospel collapses all teaching into christology, likewise everything in the ministry converges on the "hour".

John 6:2 A large crowd kept *following him*, 3 Jesus went up the mountain. 14 *"This is indeed the prophet."* 15 (They) were about to take him by force to make him *king*. 20 But he said to them, *"It is I; do not be afraid."* 24 (They) went to Capernaum *looking for Jesus*. 26 Jesus answered them, *"Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27 (Work for) for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."* 29 Jesus answered them, *"This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."* 35 Jesus said to them, *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. 36 But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. 40 This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."* 42 They were saying, *"Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph?"*. 44 No one can *come to me* unless drawn by the Father who sent me. 51 *I am the living bread* that came down from heaven. (T)he bread that *I will give* for the life of the world is my *flesh*." 57 *Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father*, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 62 Then what if you were to see the *Son of Man ascending to where he was before?* 63 The words that *I have spoken* to you are spirit and life. 65 And he said, *"For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."* 67 So Jesus asked the twelve, *"Do you also wish to go away?"* 68 Simon Peter answered him, *"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."*

The theological *centre* is:

John 6:29 Jesus answered them, *"This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."*

The theological *climax* is:

John 6:68 Simon Peter answered him, *"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."*

In conclusion, the language in John 6 combines two areas of teaching: (i) faith in Jesus and (ii) the eucharist. This raises a key question: what was happening in the community at the time of writing that this most penetrating of New Testament writers felt obliged to present the stories with this focus? It looks as if the writer wishes to remind his readers that they cannot properly take part in the eucharist without a profound penetration of the mystery of Christ - his divine origin, his incarnation, his mission, redemption through his death, his

glorification in the resurrection and his indwelling in the believer.<sup>7</sup> Just as in chapter 13, where he challenges the community to make a living connection between eucharist and praxis, here in chapter 6, he challenges the community to make a living connection between faith in Jesus and the eucharist. This makes a very good balance to his other concern about the inner meaning of the supper as mutual loving service. It is not without relevance for today that neither of these issues has gone away.<sup>8</sup> Before coming to the Gospels readings themselves, we need, finally to take a look at the discourse in John 6.

### C. The Discourse in John 6

In general, the long discourses in the Fourth Gospel do not give us the words or topics of the historical Jesus. Rather, we have here the later meditations of the genius who wrote the Fourth Gospel, meditations put on the lips of Jesus to explore and articulate the relationship between the believer in the later first century and the Risen Lord. This is true also of the discourse in chapter 6, with one extra dimension: we catch a glimpse here of later first century *preaching*, as can be shown by comparison with other homilies of the time. Research into contemporary homilies (Philo) and later midrashic homilies shows that at the time there was a recognisable homiletic form, with the following characteristics:<sup>9</sup>

- (i) Homilies are in a midrashic (ruminating, paraphrasing, updating) style.
- (ii) Homilies make use of a *main quotation in two parts*; these are dealt with in sequence, with the first part of the quotation under consideration in the first part of the homily and the second part of the quotation in the second part of the homily.
- (iii) As is often the case, the beginnings and the endings of homilies resemble each other.
- (iv) In this style of homily, a further perspective is given by the use of

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<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, in *Deus Caritas Est* (§1), writes "Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."

<sup>8</sup> Without "putting windows on men's souls" (as Elizabeth I put it), it would seem that often we celebrate without an effect on our lives and that often people come to communion without a clear, grown-up faith in Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> The pioneering work of Peder Borgen in *Bread from Heaven. An exegetical study of the concept of manna in the Gospel of John and the writings of Philo* (Leiden: Brill, 1981) is acknowledged by Raymond Brown in his *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 346. Raymond Brown's own *Introduction to the Gospel of John* (edited by Francis J. Moloney, New York: Doubleday, 2003) is an eminently accessible study, fascinating and pastorally sensitive.

of subsidiary quotation from elsewhere in the Bible.

All of these features may be traced in John 6:31-59.

(i) In verses 31-59, we have an early Christian homily, in a recognisably midrashic form, combining text, paraphrase and haggadic material: John 6:33, 50, 41, 51, 58, 38, 42.

(ii) The main quotation is taken from Exodus 16:4

Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.

Texts also echoed are these:

Ex 16:15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.

Ex 16:2 The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

(iii) The beginning and the end do, in fact, echo each other:

John 6:31 Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 32 Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

John 6:58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

(iv) The subsidiary citation, in 6:45,<sup>10</sup> is from Is 54:13:

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<sup>10</sup> We touch here on a theological and pastoral interest of the Johannine community, as may be seen from the further reference in the first letter of St John: "As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him" (1 John 2:27).



Isa 54:13 All your children shall be taught by the LORD,  
and great shall be the prosperity of your children.

Finally, the suspicion that here we have a homily is surely confirmed by v.59:

John 6:59 He said these things while he was *teaching in the synagogue* at Capernaum.

All this seems to confirm what one might already suspect. As usual in the Fourth Gospel, we are not dealing at all with the actual words of Jesus but rather the writer has made use of homiletic material (his own?) of striking relevance to his Christological and eucharistic concerns.

Before plunging into a commentary on the relevant readings, I will summarise. In this sixth chapter of Fourth Gospel, we have before us a teaching about the person of Jesus, about faith in him, and about the eucharist, *in that order*. The writer has made creative use of a traditional sequence already present in the synoptic tradition, as always reflecting his own theological vision and vocabulary. In particular, the writer is concerned that people are taking part in the eucharist without a deep awareness of who Jesus really is. In tandem with his other concerns in chapter 13, here he lays before his readers a series of stories all of which have the identity of Jesus as their centre. Because our primary basis for interpretation has been dealt with in sections A, B and C, the comment in D can be more succinct.

#### **D. A Close Reading of Each Sunday Gospel Followed by Suggestions for Prayer and Preaching**

The function of the homily is not first of all to tell people what to think or what to feel (!). It is, rather, to help people recognise their experiences and to name them in the light of faith. A homily explores, in an incomplete and open way, where we are on the journey. A word from the preacher which stays very close to his or her experience will lead to reflections very close to the life experiences of the hearers. In this way, life can open Scripture for us and Scripture can help us appreciate what is happening at a deeper level, and a truly living word emerges. With that in mind we move to the passages for reflection. Each section is made up of two steps: comment on the text and reflections on where to go with this passage.

17 <sup>th</sup> Sunday	Jn 6:1-15	July 28 <sup>11</sup>
18 <sup>th</sup> Sunday	Jn 6:24-35	August 4
19 <sup>th</sup> Sunday	Jn 6:41-51	August 11
20 <sup>th</sup> Sunday	Jn 6:51-58	August 18

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<sup>11</sup> The dates, valid for 2024, are added for convenient reference.

(a) *The Multiplication of Loaves 6:1-15*  
 Year B, Sunday 17 (6:1-15)

6:1 After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. 2 A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. 3 Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. 4 Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. 5 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?” 6 He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. 7 Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” 8 One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, 9 “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” 10 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. 11 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. 12 When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” 13 So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. 14 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.” 15 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.

*Comment*<sup>12</sup>

- 1-2 Faith on the basis of signs is always suspect in the Fourth Gospel.
- 3 Just like Moses, Jesus goes up a mountain.
- 4 The context is Passover. This feast was the context for the programmatic temple action in John 2, as well as for the dénouement of this Gospel in John 19-20.
- 5-7 Like Moses, Jesus is the first to notice the problem.<sup>13</sup> There is an implied comparison, because, unlike Moses, Jesus really has the answer.

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<sup>12</sup> A very nuanced and theologically aware treatment of the miracles here may be conveniently found in John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew, Volume II* (New York: Doubleday, 1994, vol. 2, chapter 23) “The So-Called Nature Miracles”. He treats the Feeding of the Multitude on pp. 950-967 and the Walking on the Water on pp. 905-934. The writing is a model of clarity and responsibility.

<sup>13</sup> Num 11:13 Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’

- 8-9 Like Elisha, Jesus has some resources.<sup>14</sup> The first reading for today evokes this Elisha text.
- 10-11 The traditional telling, very like that in Mark, is combined with eucharistic echoes.
- 12-13 In this Gospel, “not losing any” and “gathering” have special overtones for the communion of the believers.
- 14-15 Here, it is clear that Jesus is a prophet (as also for the Samaritan woman) and a king (as in the trial scene in John 18-19). Jesus’ mode of being prophet and king, of course, is utterly different to the received expectations, as the dialogue with Pilate makes clear.

Two other texts could be brought to bear here:

Deut 8:3 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.

John 6:27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.

### *Reflection*

For *lectio divina*, one could start by reflecting on times of need in one’s own life, coupled perhaps the estimation of apparently inadequate resources. It might have been that the simple giving of what one had led to results which took those involved by surprise. The metaphor of bread is linked to hunger. For the homily, the preacher could build on the previous point by inviting the group to recall any relevant experiences of need which formed part of their journey of faith, critical times when they felt nourished by their faith. Part of that journey may well include an initial, not yet fully formed, grasp of who Jesus is. For preaching, the congregation could be invited to notice similar contexts or times of need. What image of Jesus followed? What relationship *then* developed? Where are we now in relation to that? It is not without interest that the initiative comes from Jesus, suggesting that we don’t know how hungry we are until we encounter him. Often, it is only when we are surprised by relief (and belief) that we recognise how needy we really were.

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<sup>14</sup> 2 Kings 4:38 When Elisha returned to Gilgal, there was a famine in the land. As the company of prophets was sitting before him, he said to his servant (*paidarion*, in the Septuagint) “Put the large pot on, and make some stew for the company of prophets.” 2 Kings 4:42 A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley (same word in the Septuagint) and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, “Give it to the people and let them eat.”

(b) *The Walking on the Sea John 6:16-21*

(Although this passage is *not* read at this point in the lectionary, because it is so central to the concerns of the writer, a word may not be out of place.)

John 6:16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17 got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. 18 The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. 19 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. 20 But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." 21 Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

*Comment*

16-18 Weather conditions are of no interest to the author of the Fourth Gospel. The darkness is a metaphor for the believer's situation at the time when "Jesus had not yet come to them".

19-20 Properly speaking, this is an experience of the numinous, couched as always in imagery which is both allusive and elusive. The terror is not *psychological fright* but *ontological awe* before the mystery as such. After speaking the divine name (I AM), Jesus offers deep reassurance.

21 Two connected moments are presented: the desire of faith and the arrival of faith.

Ps 77:19 Your way was through the sea,  
your path, through the mighty waters;  
yet your footprints were unseen.

Ps 107:30 Then they were glad because they had quiet,  
and he brought them to their desired haven.

A short, connecting paragraph links the opening scenes with the Bread of Life discourse.

John 6:22 The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. 23 Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks.

*Reflection*

It might be helpful to begin with the experience of psychological fright, something more frequent and near enough to the feelings in this passage. At some point or other, nearly everyone has had times of fear and being alone.

Perhaps in those time, faith in the Risen Lord has brought with it courage and strength. This gospel story, more an epiphany than a miracle, may reflect a memory of the time between the departure of Jesus and the self revelation of the Risen Lord. More generally, it invites reflection on one's own experiences of the mystery, experiences both awesome (*mysterium tremendum*) and consoling (*et fascinans*).<sup>15</sup> In a *lectio divina* approach, we could reflect on our own moments of elusive awareness of God, impossible to render in words but rocks on which we build nonetheless. Many people have such experiences (in love, in nature, in becoming a parent, in bereavement, in reconciliation and so on), without being able to name and hence hold on to the experience. The goal of a spiritual guide would be to help people retrieve and name such moments, because they nourish us long after they have faded. Another line of reflection could explore the experience of home-coming, at a natural, family level and on the spiritual plane, the home-coming of the faith.

(c) *Introduction to the Discourse John 6:22-30*  
(Year B, Sunday 18, John 6:24-35)

There is a problem with the lectionary at this point because the Gospel passages are not well selected. For this reflection, I will use the divisions which seem to me to make more sense, even though they cut across the readings set for worship. The overlaps will be noticed.

6:22 The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. 23 Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. 24 So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. 24 So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. 25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" 26 Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." 28 Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" 29 Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." 30 So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?"

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<sup>15</sup> *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), by Rudolf Otto, has lost none of its relevance since first published in 1917. See especially chapters IV and VI.

## Comment

22-23 A search takes place.

24-26 The misconstruing of the sign is again attacked.

27 The first part of this verse ought to be read in conjunction with John 4:31-34.<sup>16</sup> The “food” of Jesus, his source of nourishment and inner life, is doing the will of the one who sent him, a task accomplished, perfected, on the cross. Jesus then offers us this same “food” of obedience, that is, this loving relationship. The later imagery of giving his flesh brings together the imagery of food and cross: it is there that he metaphorically gives us himself for our nourishment. The second part of this verse gives rise to the question which follows.

28 One of the very few totally open questions in this Gospel. It is significant that the other great open question in the Fourth Gospel is on the lips of Pilate (19:9), “Where are you from?”

29 The answer is unequivocal and serves to remind us that “believing in him whom the Father has sent” is the core teaching of this entire chapter.

30 This question probably reflects the discussions between the Johannine Christians and their Jewish neighbours.

## Reflection

There are at least two avenues of reflection here. A search *is* going on, a not quite disinterested, open search but a search nevertheless. My own quest for meaning, often mixed up with “food that perishes”, should provide plenty of material for reflection. The occasional moment of real lucidity might be noticed: what must we do to perform the works of God? A preacher could go on and present the real challenge of Christian faith, the figure of Jesus himself. Bishop John Robinson’s phrase comes to mind: “the scandalous particularity of the incarnation”. Somehow today we have to negotiate a recognition of the real diversity of faiths, while keeping before our eyes the person of Jesus, the unique and irreducible heart of the Christian faith.

(d) *Homily - Part One John 6:31-48*  
Year B, Sundays 18 (6:24-35) and 19 (6:41-51)

As we saw, the homily/discourse takes the two parts of the citation and deals with each one separately. There is, however, more. Following on the interpretative sentence “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world,” it is clear that the first part of the

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<sup>16</sup> John 4:31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” 32 But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” 33 So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” 34 Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.

discourse identifies Jesus as the bread of life, in whom we are to believe and in the second part, the mode of his “being bread” is his giving of himself in death. This adds an important christological layer to our reading. It is also possible that John intends both a christological reading for understanding Jesus and a sacramental reading for the community’s practice.

6:31 Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” 32 Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” 34 They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

35 Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. 36 But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. 37 Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; 38 for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.” 41 Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” 42 They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” 43 Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. 44 No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. 45 It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. 46 Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47 Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life.

### *Comment*

31-34 Here the two-part text, which shapes the rabbinic homily, is given. In the first part, we deal with “he gave them bread from heaven”.

35-40 This is a summary of the theology of the Fourth Gospel. There is a very close link with the Prologue and 3:16, “God so loved the world”. The “losing nothing” makes a link between the multiplication story and the final prayer of Jesus (17:12). Cf. 18:19.

41-42 The “whence” of Jesus is a tremendous issue in this Gospel. The very certainty of the Jews blocks any evolution of insight.

43-46 Here is the subsidiary text, taken from Is 54:13. The reality behind the

- text is a key element in the experience of the Johannine community.<sup>17</sup>
- 47 A theme in John. See, for example, 1:18.
- 48 This simple phrase frames and closes the first part of the rabbinic homily.

### *Reflection*

The preacher can start by exploring his or her own experiences: when did I ever come to Jesus? What was the sense of “being drawn” like? Has a hope of resurrection been engendered in me? On the other hand, perhaps in my own life a complacent, or indeed, an over-zealous certainty about Jesus could have held back any growth in relationship and faith.<sup>18</sup> This is a special risk of the “professionally religious”. The society in which we live invites a comparison with other faiths and seeing not only the good but also God in them. Today, of course, Jesus as unique, as *the* revelation of God, is uncomfortably challenging and yet remains a vital part of our inheritance to be integrated into our new awareness of the many revelations of God. Finally, there is something here of the mystery of the quite personal call of faith. In the one family, with identical experiences, it can happen that some are attuned to the faith and some, unaccountably, seem not to be. Each of these possible avenues should not be taken up, but perhaps one or other of them might be especially relevant in a particular community of faith.

### *(e) Homily - Part Two John 6:49-59 (Year B, Sunday 20; John 6:51-58)*

6:49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” 52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” 53 So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55 for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” 59 He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

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<sup>17</sup> See footnote 10 above.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine’s often quoted phrase may be relevant here: “If you have understood, then it is not God” (*Sermo* 52, 16: PL 38, 360).



## Comment

- 49 At this point, the second part of the quotation from Exodus is taken up.  
50-51 Behind the symbolic language, the invitation is to have faith in the Jesus who died for us. Flesh is used because we are not dealing with the body of Christ in the eucharist but with the bodily self-giving of Jesus on the cross.
- 52 The symbolic language is open to misinterpretation and this is what happens, in a typically Johannine way.
- 53-56 The Johannine Jesus compounds the shock and paradox. The real shock and paradox are constituted by the death of Jesus. One of the keys is the mutual indwelling of the believer and the Risen Christ.
- 57 One of the powerful “just as” expressions in this Gospel. These usually imply not simply a comparison but a continuity of mission from the Father through Jesus to the believer.
- 58 The contrast is between Moses and Jesus, Jews and Christians.
- 59 The writer reveals the homiletic source of this material.

## Reflection

Even though this text is very focused on Jesus and may seem distant from ordinary life, nevertheless, the starting point has to be something within our lived experience, thus providing a foothold in the familiar to open up the gospel passage. One could launch the reflection by recalling significant situations in which the costly gift of self nourished others, leading perhaps to the gift of new courage and new life. Christians believe that Jesus gives life by giving himself. This is also the path of discipleship - the believer also gives life by the gift of self. Such memories may lead to the real heart of what is being said here: faith in Jesus and the meaning of his death and resurrection. At this point, questions arise such as, what is at the centre of my life? What give me nourishment and energy? How has that actually taken place in my own, quite personal journey? For the preacher, it may be best to come up with a personal faith statement and invite the hearers to engage in a similar exercise. Above all, this is an invitation to *faith*, understood as deep, deep trust. In the words of another text, we believe God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19). At this point, it is impossible not to think of the eucharist. Nevertheless, perhaps the best way to reflect on it would be to think of the eucharist as offering a participation, a communion in Jesus’ journey to the Father, through death and resurrection. As a Eucharistic Prayer expresses it, “we join our life to his, a perfect prayer of boundless love”.

(f) *Consequences John 6:60-65*  
Year B, Sunday 21 (Jn 6:60-69)

6:60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were

complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65 And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

### *Comment*

- 60 Probably reflecting the experience of the Johannine community. On account of the high Christology of the leader, it is likely that a schism took place, as reflected in the First Letter of John. The teaching is about the identity, death and resurrection of Jesus.
- 61-64 The message here is that if the cross “bothers” you, what about the resurrection? The mention of the betrayal reminds us of the Last Supper and hence of the Lord’s Supper. In verse 63, there may be an echo of the synoptic saying in the garden, that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. The same verse echoes the conversation with the Samaritan woman - God wants worshippers in spirit and in truth.
- 65 As several times in John’s Gospel, this reflects the mystery of grace and indeed our ordinary experience that some believe and some don’t, even with the very same upbringing. “Granted” and “drawn” have the same agent in the Fourth Gospel.

### *Reflection*

“This teaching is difficult” has of course been the experience of many in the congregation and, if we are honest, in the experience of the preacher as well. For many people, the difficulty lies with the ethical teaching of the Church. However, the focus here is not this or that aspect of Christian doctrine, but the person of Christ and his death on the cross. These *are* difficult topics and we may hope that the preacher will not shirk the task of mediating the core realities of faith in an honest and engaging way. These days we are, for good and for ill, much more free in our faith options and the temptation to “go away” is a choice made by many. Why I, the preacher, do not go away would make a very interesting and engaging reflection for people today. An opening of the vulnerable heart of my faith could be very life-giving indeed.

(g) *Dénouement John 6:66-71*  
Year B, Sunday 21 (Jn 6:60-69)

6:66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67 So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” 68 Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy

One of God.” 70 Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.” 71 He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

### *Comment*

66 Very likely, this gives us a reaction to the high Christology of the leader within the Johannine community, causing a schism reflected also in 1 John.

67 It is Jesus who make the implicit inner thought explicit.

68-69 This is the Johannine equivalent to the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. The opening question is rhetorical and the three-fold answer (words of eternal life, believe, knowing he is the Holy One) is based on experience.

70-71 It is possible at the level of writing that the author wishes to associate the later schismatic group in the community with the earlier betrayer. For our purposes here, the reference serves to evoke events around the Last Supper of the Lord.

### *Reflection*

In our experience today as believing community, “many” have walked away from the community of faith, for a variety of reasons, complex and simple. For those who have remained, an inevitable question arises, “Do you also wish to go away?” We should be able to give, at least to ourselves, an account of the hope that is within us (1 Pet 3:15). The preacher could offer something of why he or she remains in ministry at this hugely difficult time. An unadorned personal account may inspire other to reflect for themselves. What have I come to know and believe about Jesus? In the Catholic tradition, we hold to *reasonable* faith. This is not to say that faith can be fully converted into concepts and logic. However, faith does not invite us to live in two worlds, the reasonable and the religious, but on the contrary to live in one world, with the different dimensions in reasonable dialogue with each other. Otherwise, as individuals we are “divided against ourselves” and cannot stand, the very opposite of a holistic, integrating experience of faith. To go back to the Markan substratum, the fundamental question remains, “Who do *you* say I am?” It may be some consolation to notice that a dramatic sequence which began with crowds and others evolved in conflict now closes with just Jesus and those who believe in him. A certain sifting has taken place.

### **Conclusion**

Across the Fourth Gospel as a whole, there are issues to do with the eucharist. However, as I hope we have seen, in the sixth chapter of St John these issues are focused on the identity of Jesus, his gift of life and our faith in him. These verses portray experiences of faith and invite us to reflect on like experiences in our own lives. One of the goals of the preacher is, after all, to help people

recognise what is happening in their own lives. We hope to lead ourselves and our listeners to the point where we can say with Peter, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (6:68-69). Then we will have done the work of God, which is that we “believe in him whom he has sent” (6:29).