

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 110 (109); 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Luke 9:11-17

Jesus said: Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each

Luke 9:10 *On their return the apostles told Jesus all they had done. He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida.* 11 When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.



KIND OF WRITING

The story forms an important bridge in Luke's narrative between the question raised in 9:9 ("Who is this?") and the confession in 9:20. The evocation of the Eucharist was already present in Mark's version, so that, by the time Luke's received this tradition, it is already being read in another register. The symbolism of the account(s) makes it difficult to get back to an original tradition not to speak of an original "event." Any literalist "down reading"—such as they shared their sandwiches—is to be strenuously resisted, of course!

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

There are substantial echoes in this text of the story of the manna in the desert: Exodus 16 and Numbers 11. In particular, the miracles of Elijah and Elisha should be noticed. The Gospel of Luke frequently underlines and echoes the Elijah traditions and expansions.

Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. *The jar of meal was not emptied*, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah. (1 Kgs 17:13–16)

A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty *loaves of barley* and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat."

Thought for the day

Bodily hunger and thirst are easy to recognise—we feel them directly. The deeper hungers can take longer, especially in our "culture of distraction" where there is so little room for reflection and real conversation. These hungers are just as real, of course, and call for recognition and response. But the first step is really awareness and attention to the hints and nudges life provides.

Prayer

You have formed us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in you. Amen.

But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" So he repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord. (2 Kgs 4:42–44)

"You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, *fifties* and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace."

So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. Moses chose able men from all Israel and appointed them as heads over the people, as officers over thousands, hundreds, *fifties*, and tens." (Exod 18:21–25)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Reversal of poverty is part of the vision of the Kingdom, as we see:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Luke

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The multiplication of the loaves is a natural choice for Corpus Christi. The lectionary excerpt begins at v. 11, but the story really starts at v. 10, so it is included above in italics. This story is told no fewer than six times in the NT, twice in both Mark and Matthew, and once each in John and Luke. The key, when reading shared accounts, is to pay attention to what is distinctive to each one. In our case, two things stand out. Firstly, Luke brings out the Eucharistic symbolism more strongly. Secondly, he underscores the intermediary role of the twelve, as he looks ahead to their importance in the Acts. Overall, Luke is very attached to Elijah / Elisha symbolism which comes out in this story.

1:52–53)

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” (Luke 6:21)

Meals are really significant in Luke’s Gospel—Jesus is shown eating twice as frequently as in Mark and the tradition continues in the Acts of the Apostles. Two texts may illustrate:

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”” (Luke 24:30–32)

“We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. (Acts 10:39–41)

ST PAUL

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. (2 Cor 9:6–10)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 10 In the different Gospels the story is variously located. Only Luke has the reference to Bethsaida at the start (Mk 6:45 does refer it, but at the end). At this point, Luke leaves out a great part of Mark—the so-call Great Omission—Mk 6:45–8:26, which began and ended with a reference to Bethsaida. Already in Mark, these stories form the background to Jesus’ identity and in his own way Luke follows Mark’s impulse.

Verse 11 In Luke’s telling, the crowds really are “Gospel greedy,” as we say,

and they come for Jesus’ message and for healing. Oddly, Luke omits Mark’s mention of compassion and their being like sheep without a shepherd.

Verses 12 The time marker reminds us of 24:29. The twelve take the initiative here. Their concern expresses a compassion for the poor and the hungry. (See also Acts 2:42, 4:34; 6:1–6 and 11:27–29). Their advice is certainly practical, apart from finding the money!

Verse 13 Jesus responds with a challenge. Then we learn the actual resources present—not absolutely nothing, but well short of adequate. The apostles are still thinking on a very material level. For Luke, interestingly, the twelve themselves have this resource, unlike in the other tellings. The irony of the 200 denarii is omitted by Luke. The imperative makes a link with Elisha (see above). Why fish has puzzled commentators. There are tenuous links with Jewish tradition—not only water from the rock but fish in the water! It was certainly an early Christian symbol, but how early is difficult to establish.

Verses 14–15 Luke goes for the greater numbers, so as to underline the wonderful nature of the feeding of so many. The groups of fifty may echo the organisation of Israel in the desert: see Exod 18:21–25 above. As an aside, Luke also likes “fifty” as a number: Luke 7:41; 9:14; 16:6; Acts 13:20; 19:19. The particular verb to sit is found only in Luke in the NT: Luke 7:36 (Pharisee); 9:14–15 (miracle); 14:8 (parable); 24:30 (Emmaus).

Verse 16 Here we have a clear and intentional echo of the Eucharistic worship of the early church. As we know the Gospels were written not only in the light of the Resurrection, but also under the influence of early church traditions. Cf. “Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”” (Luke 22:19)

Luke’s redaction of Mark is very clear here. Compare:

Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. (Mark 8:6; cf. Lk 22:19)

Looked up to heaven: cf. Job 22:26–27, in the Greek Old Testament / LXX. It underlines the context of prayer, which

fits Luke’s portrait of Jesus as man of prayer.

Gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd: The intermediary role of the Twelve anticipates their importance in the Acts later on.

Verse 17 The first part of this verse describes extravagance associated with the end of time. Cf. “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.” (Isa 25:6) Luke, in the Greek, moves the expression “all” to a position of emphasis—something to consider in the light of the all / many translation in the Missal, perhaps.

In Luke’s view, the church’s ministry of feeding the hungry stands between Jesus’ own ministry and its fulfilment in the heavenly banquet. The mention of twelve baskets (rather than seven in Gentile symbolism) underscores the fulfilment of Jewish expectation.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus welcomes the crowd, teaches them, and cures those in need of healing. Bring to mind the ways in which the story of Jesus and his message have brought you enlightenment, and healing.

2. The miracle is symbolic of the abundance of blessings coming to us from God through Jesus. How has your faith in Jesus been a source of nourishment to you? What blessings have you received through your faith?

3. When the disciples became aware of the problem they wanted to send the crowd away and Jesus told them “You give them something to eat”. They thought what they had was insufficient but Jesus used the little they had to feed the crowd. Have you ever found that when you give the little you have to a situation, the results were beyond your expectations?

PRAYER

You have blessed all generations, O God most high, in Jesus, our compassionate saviour, for through him you invite us to your kingdom, welcome us to your table, and provide us with nourishment in abundance.

Teach us to imitate your unfailing kindness and to build up Christ’s body, the Church, by generously handing on to others the gifts we have received from your bounty. Amen.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes

1 Cor 11:23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This reading—from the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday—is perfectly suitable for Corpus Christi. It is good to remember the more "historical" context as we mark a "doctrinal" feast, because our understanding of Eucharistic presence cannot be separated from the Eucharist as whole, nor, indeed, from the contexts in the life of Jesus and the in the practice of the early Church.

KIND OF WRITING

Although within a letter, the excerpt is kind of *chreia* or brief anecdote about Jesus. The Lord's Supper is reported four times in the New Testament, in the three Synoptic Gospels and here in Paul. Already divergences of tradition are apparent: Matthew and Mark represent one tradition while Luke and Paul represent another. All four versions are influenced by Christian practice subsequent to the Last Supper. Finally, Paul's version is the earliest to come down to us, but even there the telling is shaped by emerging liturgical practice. For example, it seems reasonable to suppose that the instruction to do this in member (significantly absent in Matthew and Mark) represent a kind of later rubric or liturgical catechesis rather than words spoken the historical Jesus.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The context in the community is provided by Paul himself. According to the apostle's teaching, social distinctions—whether based on nature and gender, or socially constructed—have no place in the Christian polity. Paul has already signalled this in the letter: *For in the one*

Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1Corinthians 12:13; cf. Gal 3:28.)

There are two things to bear in mind. (i) The Corinthian church was not one but divided into several house churches. (ii) At this early stages, the Lord's Supper had not become detached from the regular evening dinner. In the highly stratified society of the day, it is no surprise that social distinctions re-emerged in a quite ugly way (see 1Cor 11:17-22 below). Paul is quite stern with them.

It looks as if the Lord's Supper took place in two moments. The words over the bread were spoken during the dinner (the *deipnon*) proper while the words over the cup were spoken during the subsequent drinks party (the *symposium*). Presumably, some were free to come on time while others, perhaps a lower class, did not enjoy the same flexibility. Hence, Paul's attack: *one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.* The Pauline vision of inclusion without distinction is rooted in the teaching and practice of Jesus himself. Any exclusion is in tension with the proclamation of the Kingdom and the burden of proof rests with those who would exclude. The issue at stake is a combination of vision, values and practice. Paul's interim solution is disarmingly practical and direct: *So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come.* (1Corinthians 11:33–34)

RELATED PASSAGES

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to

eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! (1Corinthians 11:17–22 NRSV)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 23 The language used—received, handed on—reflects technical rabbinic terms to passing down a tradition. "Betrayed" probably not a good translation choice here. The terms means literally "handed over" and in the Pauline writing God is the implied subject. Again, the Greek reads *artos*, meaning bread, loaf, food. The NRSV correctly expands it into "a loaf of bread" precisely because *there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.* (1Corinthians 10:17)

Verse 24 Historically, the words and actions constitute a prophetic gesture intended to interpret the *meaning* of Jesus' death following day. It is likely that the instruction to repeat comes from the tradition available both to Paul and Luke. Remembrance (*zikkron*) is strong.

Verse 25 Notice "after the supper," reflecting Graeco-Roman meal practices, according to which drinks followed the food. Jesus associates his death with the covenant and with prophetic hopes for a new covenant. Blood represents the principle of life within a person.

Verse 26 This verse is no pious exclamation but rather takes us to the heart of the matter. In Paul's teaching, the death of Jesus was God's extraordinary gesture of compassionate solidarity with broken humanity, a solidarity so deep that all the distinctions we experience—both natural and constructed—are radically set aside. Thus, the issue at Corinth was not simply practical or moral but rather it touched heart of the Christian proclamation, in faith and in life. If we really believed this, our practice would indeed be radically other.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Can I recall a time when the deep meaning of the Eucharist struck home?
2. If I were ask to say a few words about the Eucharist, what would I say?

PRAYER

Send into our hearts, O Lord, your Holy Spirit that we may truly recognise all as our brothers and sisters in the breaking of the bread. Amen.

King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine

Gen. 14:17 *After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley).*

Gen 14:18 And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. 19 He blessed him and said,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; 20 and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”

And Abram gave him one tenth of everything. 21 *Then the king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself.”* 22 *But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have sworn to the Lord, God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, 23 that I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is yours, so that you might not say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’* 24 *I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre. Let them take their share.”*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

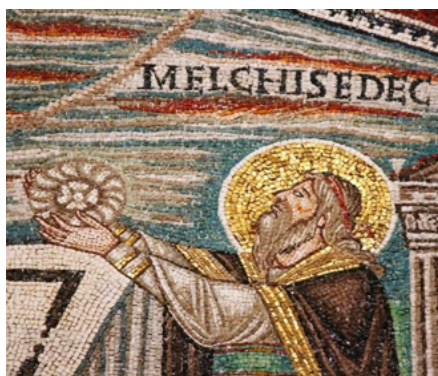
The superficial link with the feast is the mention of bread and wine. There is, of course, a much deeper connection familiar from the Letter to the Hebrews which we can explore in these notes.

KIND OF WRITING

With this unique appearance, Melchizedek is a bit of a mystery figure, giving rise to a great deal of speculation later on. The king is an otherwise unknown figure and even “Salem” is unknown. Within the full story, the generosity of the king of Salem is contrasted with lack of generosity of the king of Sodom.

In Qumran, Melchizedek was a source of further speculation and evolution, with even one document dedicated to him, 1QMelch. He enjoys both a high place in heaven and a role in eschatological judgment.

Hebrews exploits Melchizedek as eternal high priest of mysterious origin and issue: *Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.* (Heb 7:3) See also Psalm 110.



ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Genesis is made up of two large sections, as follows:

Primeval History

Gen 1: origin of the world
Gen 2-11: origin of the nations

Origin of Israel

Gen 12-25 the Abraham cycle
Gen 26-36 the Jacob cycle
Gen 36-50 the Joseph cycle

Our reading comes from early in the Abraham cycle of tales.

The full scene (vv.17-24) is carefully choreographed:

v. 17 King of Sodom arrives.	A
v. 18 King of Salem arrives	B
vv. 19-20 King of Salem speaks	B*
v. 21 King of Sodom speaks	A*
vv. 22-24 Abraham replies	

In the context of the time of writing, this encounter is meant to legitimate the Jerusalem priesthood as ancient (predating Abraham's arrival) and centred in the holy city from time immemorial. Very likely, the priests of the time of writing are staking a claim over against the “secular” rulers of Judah under the Persians.

RELATED PASSAGES

Gen. 14:13 Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and of Aner; these were allies of Abram. 14 When Abram heard that his nephew had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred eighteen of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. 15 He divided his forces against them by night, he and his ser-

vants, and routed them and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus. 16 Then he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his nephew Lot with his goods, and the women and the people. (vv. 17-24 as above)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 18 Both kings met Abraham simultaneously, so that this vignette is not really a separate episode. The etymology of the name is important in later tradition and in Hebrews. It means either Milku-is-righteous or My-king-is-righteous. When Hebrews reads Salem to mean shalom, this is a rather forced, even historically false derivation. Salem is unknown. Bread and wine are royal fare in the Ancient Near East (1 Sam 16:20) and often accompany animal sacrifice (Num 15:2-10; 1 Sam 1:24; 10:3). In any case, Melchizedek is putting on a royal feast for the conquering Abraham. “God Most High” translates accurately El-Elyon, one of the divine titles used by the patriarchs: El = the Deity and elyon = Most High.

Verses 19-20 In the next two verses the word “to bless” is heard. Cf. Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen 12:1-3) Tithing was an widespread custom in the Ancient Near East. Thus Abraham responds to the gesture of Melchizedek and also sets an example (!) for his descendants.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Have you experience being blessed by God and felt the call to be a source of blessing?

2. God, the most high creator, is also a lover who loves and guides the lives of us all. How do you see God's presence and action in your life?

PRAYER

Loving God, send us your blessing and guidance. May we be aware of your presence and action in our lives that we may also give you thanks. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 110 (109); 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Luke 9:11-17

READINGS 1 AND 3

While Melchizedek is of interest in himself, the reading is chosen on account of the offerings of bread and wine which anticipate the offerings of the five loaves and two fish.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

In the context, Psalm 110 is perfect. It was read around the time of Jesus as a messianic prophecy.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Genesis 14:18-20

Melchizedek—a king and priest—honours Abraham in a way which was taken to foreshadow the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

St Paul writes because the Lord's Supper at Corinth was fractured, having no practical effect on their lives. Traditional social divisions undermined the vision of all being one in Christ.

Gospel

Luke 9:11-17

In all the Gospels, the multiplication of the loaves is to be read symbolically, referring to the later Christian celebration of the Lord's Supper.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 23 June

Genesis 12:1-9

The story of Abraham, our father in faith, begins today and our reading is *the* foundational scene. In the preceding chapter 11, Abraham is mentioned almost casually and then, all of a sudden, he is called in an extraordinary way by God. The promise given to Abraham—that he will be a blessing to all the tribes of the earth—was seen by Paul to be fulfilled in Jesus.

Matthew 7:1-5

It seems to be human nature that we see more easily in others the faults we have

ourselves. We should reflect on our judgements because they hold a mirror to ourselves. The tone is humorous and deadly serious at the same time.

Tuesday 24 June

Birth of John the Baptist

Isaiah 49:1-6

The mention of “forming in the womb”, a prophetic idiom, makes this a suitable reading for the feast, anticipating the Gospel. Ultimately, the reading points beyond John the Baptist to Jesus as the light of the nations.

Acts 13:22-26

It is not possible to tell the story of salvation, or indeed that of Jesus, without mentioning John the Baptist, as we see in this reading.

Luke 1:57-66, 80

Our Gospel is devoted mainly to the naming of John the Baptist and the reaction to his birth. We too are invited to “treasure these things in our heart.”

Wednesday 25 June

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Our reading is both deep and mysterious. In effect, it is a renewal of God's promise to Abraham and the renewal takes the form of a covenant ceremony. By walking through the halved animals, Abraham says “may this happen to me” if I break the agreement.

Matthew 7:15-20

The early church had an abundance of prophets, some genuine, others false. How to tell the difference? According to their fruits, of course.

Thursday 26 June

Genesis 16:1-12, 15-16

In the ancient world, polygamy led to wifely rivalry over fertility. The story is slanted against Hagar and Ishmael, but they too receive a (slightly unsettling) blessing!

Matthew 7:21-29

A bit of geography may help us. Dry river beds in Israel—known as *wadis*—are subject to unpredictable and potentially fatal flash floods. Building your

house on sand, i.e. on the sandy floor of a wadi is very, very dumb!

Friday 27 June

Most Sacred Heart of Jesus

Ezekiel 34:11-6

This wonderful reading is in many ways both a deep reflection on Psalm 23 and a outspoken response to the failure of the “shepherds” at the time of great Exile in Babylon. It cannot fail to inspire today.

Romans 5:5-11

Beginning with the last verse of the previous paragraph (vv.1-5), we hear about the extraordinary love of God in Christ. You can feel Paul's continued astonishment, years and years after his first encounter with the Risen Lord.

Luke 15:3-17

The reading takes up the image of the shepherd again, this time underling the note of rejoicing, typical of the Gospel of Luke.

Saturday 1 July

St Irenaeus, bishop and doctor

Genesis 18:1-15

Known in the Orthodox tradition as *The Hospitality of Abraham*, this wonderful scene has reverberated both in Scripture and in art. It is alluded to in Hebrews: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* (Hebrews 13:2) It also inspired the much-loved Old Testament Trinity of Rublev.

Matthew 8:5-17

To whom was Jesus sent? According to himself, to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel.” In this Gospel, we overhear the realisation of the early church that Gentiles too could come to faith in Jesus. Cf. *Then Peter started speaking: “I now truly understand that God does not show favouritism in dealing with people, but in every nation the person who fears him and does what is right is welcomed before him.”* (Acts 10:34–35)