



After this, Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee – or of Tiberias – and a large crowd followed him, impressed by the signs he had done in curing the sick. Jesus climbed the hillside and sat down there with his disciples. The time of the Jewish Passover was near.

Looking up, Jesus saw the crowds approaching and said to Philip, 'Where can we buy some bread for these people to eat?' He said this only to put Philip to the test; he himself knew exactly what he was going to do. Philip answered, 'Two hundred denarii would not buy enough to give them a little piece each.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said, 'Here is a small boy with five barley loaves and two fish; but what is that among so many?' Jesus said to them, 'Make the people sit down.' There was plenty of grass there, and as many as five thousand men sat down. Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were sitting there; he then did the same with the fish, distributing as much as they wanted. When they had eaten enough he said to the disciples, 'Pick up the pieces left over, so that nothing is wasted.' So they picked them up and filled twelve large baskets with scraps left over from the meal of five barley loaves. Seeing the sign that he had done, the people said, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.' Jesus, as he realised they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, fled back to the hills alone.

John 6:1-15

As many as five thousand

Thursday 1st week in Lent

The account of the miracles of the loaves is one of the few connecting points between the synoptics and John. This may point to the deep impression the event made upon the disciples of Jesus in whatever form it took place. Like the Bethesda healing, however, the miracle produces further confusion and opposition. It leads to Peter's great confession of faith that is another point of connection between the two gospel traditions.

John's gospel does not possess a narrative of the institution of the eucharist. What it does have, however, in this chapter, is a most profound theological exploration of the eucharist. In that context, then, John makes the miracle of the loaves into a eucharistic story, one that is re-enacted on every occasion that Christians ritually break and distribute bread. In effect, what we have here is the narrative that is the Johannine equivalent of the Last Supper institution, followed by a lengthy exposition of what the eucharist means.

The key thought is 'sign'. If we wish to reach a destination we must follow the signs. This is true even for routes we travel daily, where the signs have become so embedded in our consciousness we barely think of them as signs.