Bread of Life

THE NEW SHOFAR

Unless we believe and see Jesus in the appearance of bread on the altar, we will not be able to see him in the distressing disguise of the poor. Mother Teresa

Do you believe that the Son of God can do this?

Jesus asks several different questions in the Gospels, but one in particular that has always appealed to me spiritually: *Do you believe that I can do this*? (Mt 9:28). Originally posed to two blind men, this question like all of Scripture, transcends its initial audience and can be applied to us as well. It is a question that arises in John chapter 6 when Jesus is talking about the need to eat his body and drink his blood as a way to life eternal.

Being greater than Moses is one of the marks of the Messiah. The Jews were familiar with Moses' words, "*A prophet like me will Yahweh, your God, raise up for you from among your own kindred; that is the one to whom you shall listen*" (Deut. 18:15). They were looking for a man who was like Moses, who performed mighty deeds, provided nourishment, and set captives free. These things were found in Jesus, the Messiah, who manifests Himself as the new Moses.

As Jesus was teaching in Tiberias, a multitude of people began to follow Him, *because they saw the signs which He did on those who were diseased*"(Jn 6:2). After a long day Philip approached the Lord and asked how they were to feed so many people. Jesus instructed His disciples to gather the five barley loaves and two fish that were available and have the people sit down. Jesus then gave thanks and distributed the food. All ate and were satisfied.

Like Moses before Him, Jesus provides food for the people of Israel. But He does so in a greater way. Moses called upon the Lord and the Lord provided the Manna from heaven. Jesus took what was available and miraculously multiplied it under His own power. The people who witnessed the multiplication of the bread and fish will follow Jesus to Capernaum and come face to face with one of Jesus' hardest teachings.

Jesus walks on water!

This leads us into the next scene in John 6, which lies almost hidden in the middle of the text, but serves as the interpretive key for the rest of the chapter. After Jesus fed the multitude, He *withdrew to the hills by Himself* (Jn 6:15). In the meantime, *His disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum* (Jn 6:17). Jesus had not been on the boat when His disciples departed, which leads to one of Jesus' most impressive and challenging miracles. John tells us that he and the other disciples were *about three or four miles* from the shore being buffeted by heavy winds when they sudden they saw Jesus walking towards them on the water. The disciples lurched back in fright, but Jesus said, *It is I; do not be afraid* (Jn 6:20). After hearing these words, the disciples found that they had somehow been transported to their destination, although they had just been miles away.

Once again, Jesus imitates Moses by performing a miracle with water. When leading the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses parted the Red Sea so that the people could cross over the dry land. Jesus once again outdoes Moses. Instead of parting the water and walking on the land below, Jesus simply walks across the water itself! In this scene we see Jesus' complete and total dominion over nature. According to the Scriptures, He defies the challenges the laws of nature, definitively manifesting His divine nature and power over the created world (Gen 1).

give us a sign that we may see and believe!

In the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus addressed the crowds who had gathered to hear Him speak. Many of the people who had been among the 5000 — those who were miraculously fed — were in attendance. Jesus quickly escalates the conversation by identifying Himself as the Messiah by saying that He has been anointed by God and been sent by Him into the world. Upon hearing this the people ask for a sign to accompany such a bold claim. They say, *Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat* (Jn 6:30-31). Jesus responds, *Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from Heaven…I am the Bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger and he who believes in me shall never thirst* (Jn 6:32-33, 35). Jesus was saying some radical things, but He didn't stop there.

Continuing to build upon His earlier teaching Jesus says, "*Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died…I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eat of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh* (Jn 6:49-51). But Jesus kept going. In verse 64 there is a dramatic shift in Jesus' language that conveys the seriousness of His teaching. Instead of using the typical Greek word for eat (*esthio*), Jesus switches to the Greek word *trogo* which means to "chew" or "gnaw" a "crunching sound". That difference was not lost on the Jews. After hearing this teaching*, Many of his disciple drew back and no longer walked with Him* (Jn 6:66). Jesus' teaching was simply too hard for them to grasp. They did not believe that Jesus could do what He said He could. Even though they had seen Him multiply the loaves and the fish and feed the hungry crowd.

The apostles, however, do not abandon Jesus when He asks, *Do you also want to leave?* (Jn 6:67). Peter, the spokesman for the apostles, proclaims, *Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God* (Jn 6:67-69).

What are the limits to the works of God?

Although Jesus' teaching is difficult, the apostles continue to follow the Lord, because they have seen with their own eyes the power of God. In just one day, they had seen Him feed a large crowd with limited food *and* then walk on water. Jesus had definitively revealed Himself to them as the Messiah and new Moses by performing miraculous deeds that were greater than the works of Moses. By the time Jesus presents His teaching on the Eucharist He has already proven that nothing in the created universe is outside of His control. After feeding 5000 people with a handful of scraps and walking on water, giving Himself to us under the guise of bread and wine is nothing but consistent with His other mighty deeds.

Like the Virgin Birth, the miracles of Jesus, his Resurrection and Ascension and his Promised Return at the end of time, faith includes a call to allow God to be the very God the Almighty wants to be for us and not just remain a perspective that limits the saving works of God to what we can understand and explain. John 6 opens for us the depth of the riches God offers to us, graces that sustain and empower us on our journeys to eternal life and empower us in our work of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world around us.