

**ACT III : THE SON OF GOD GIVES HIMSELF  
FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD**

**JOHN 5:1 – 6:71**

## Act Three

As noted earlier, the long discourses placed by John on Jesus' lips, for example in the scenes with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, are perhaps best understood as John's own reflections, built up from authentic sayings of Jesus but presenting John's own attempt to give expression to the insights which he gained into the mind and heart of Jesus. In this and the following Acts similar reflections abound. John is working on two levels. He is drawing on memories of the hostility which Jesus received from the religious authorities. He is also drawing on the debates between Jesus' followers and the successors of the same authorities. His aim is to present Jesus as the fulfilment of the Jewish Law given through Moses. God has replaced this gift of the Jewish Law with an even greater one: the gift of a sharing in the love which he shares with the Word – a love revealed in Jesus and offered to all who open their hearts to accept it (see 1:17).

In a special way a community gives expression to its faith in religious festivities. John places us first in the context of the Sabbath in order to present Jesus as the Son of God and therefore as the one who brings the Jewish Scriptures to their fulfilment. He then takes us to the festival of Passover in order to present Jesus as the Redeemer who nourishes us on our journey to God.

**ACT III Scene 1. Jesus gives life to a ‘dead’ man**

We are at a pool to the north east of the temple mount. Recent archaeological discoveries have unearthed the site with its unusual five porticoes – a further illustration of the accuracy of John’s local knowledge. A scene with which we are all too familiar lies before us: poor broken humanity, helpless before the ravages of sickness. The text as given in the NRSV moves straight from verse three to verse five. A number of ancient manuscripts, however, include the following: ‘They were waiting for the stirring of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had’ (5:4). The editors of the NRSV judge this to be a scribal note that was included by mistake in some manuscripts. Others judge it to be original and that John is picking up the actual expectation of the local people. Presumably an intermittent spring caused movement in the pool and popular imagination attributed the action to supernatural intervention which was thought to promise healing.

We see Jesus walking among the sick. He stops by a man whom the narrator informs us has been sick for thirty-eight years. Jesus’ opening words set the tone for the scene: ‘Do you want to be made well?’ This question is for all of us. We might ask ourselves: Where are the waters besides which we are waiting, maybe delaying? Who is disturbing them? Could there be healing in the very disturbance? When it comes to the point, do I want to be healed?

The man’s response shows just how powerless and isolated he is. This plus the fact that he has been sick for so long shows how hopeless his situation is. However, he is mistaken. It is not true that he has no one to help him. It is not true that he is without a saviour. Jesus, ‘the Saviour of the world’ (4:42), tells this ‘dead’ man, this man with no hope of life: ‘Stand up’ (the Greek *egeirō* will be used later for ‘rising from the dead’) ‘take up your mat and walk’ (compare Mark 2:11-12).

<sup>1</sup>After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. <sup>3</sup>In these lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralysed.

<sup>5</sup>One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.

<sup>6</sup>When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’

<sup>7</sup>The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.’

<sup>8</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’

<sup>9</sup>At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

**Now that day was a Sabbath.**

**<sup>10</sup>So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, 'It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.'**

In referring to this occasion as 'that day', John is recalling the hopes expressed through the prophets:

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.' Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

– Isaiah 35:4-6

'That day' – the day on which God's promise of life is being revealed – 'was a Sabbath'. This is the day which God blessed and made holy 'because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation'(Genesis 2:3). Observant Jews were expected to devote this consecrated day to the service of God and for this reason they, too, were to rest from work.

From the earliest years of Israel's presence in Canaan, there existed a prohibition against agricultural labour on the Sabbath: 'On the seventh day [the Sabbath] you shall rest; even in ploughing time and in harvest time you shall rest' (Exodus 34:21). In later writings it is evident that the prohibition against activity on the Sabbath has been extended to all kinds of non essential activities (see, for example, Jeremiah 17:19-27 and Nehemiah 13:15-22).

During and after the exile Jewish self-identity assumed a special importance now that Judah was a small part of the huge Persian empire. The people were forced to ask them-selves what it was that set them apart from the peoples around them. They sought to identify what it was that made them special to God and how they were to express this special identity. Of particular significance was the covenant which God had made with them, and among the many ways in which they responded to this covenant three stood out as important identifying traits: the practice of circumcision, certain food laws, and the institution of the Sabbath.

It was particularly this last that took on more and more importance for Jewish self-identity. Special Sabbath temple sacrifices were instituted, and, more importantly, this was the day when the people assembled for prayer in the synagogues. The Sabbath was a day consecrated to God, and its observance was symbolic of the commitment of the people to keep their part of the covenant.

You shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. ... Whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. ... Therefore the Israelites shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant.

– Exodus 31:13,16; see also Ezekiel 20:12

This consecration to the Lord was to be a source of delight:

If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord.

– Isaiah 58:13-14

By the time of Jesus those who considered themselves responsible for policing faithful adherence to the Law had surrounded the Sabbath with hundreds of detailed regulations including the prohibition against moving things from one place to another (see Mishnah tract *Shabbat* 7:2). Hence their objection to the activity of the healed man.

Jesus is the one who gives life

**<sup>11</sup>But he answered them,  
'The man who made me  
well said to me, "Take up  
your mat and walk."'**

**<sup>12</sup>They asked him,  
'Who is the man  
who said to you,  
"Take it up and walk"?''**

**<sup>13</sup>Now the man who had  
been healed did not  
know who it was, for  
Jesus had disappeared in  
the crowd that was there.**

**<sup>14</sup>Later Jesus found him  
in the temple and said to  
him, 'See, you have been  
made well!  
Do not sin any more,  
so that nothing worse  
happens to you.'**

**<sup>15</sup>The man went away  
and told the Jews that it  
was Jesus who had  
made him well.**

The man defends himself against the objection levelled at him by the religious authorities by declaring that he is acting under a higher obedience than that owed to their regulations. He is obeying the one who gave him life, though, as yet, he does not know him.

John has selected this miracle because of its sign value. Jesus has given life to a hopelessly sick man. There is, however, a far greater sickness that afflicts humanity – Jesus will speak of it as ‘death’. It is the situation of being separated from communion with God. There is a far more important ‘life’ that Jesus has come to give – he will speak of it as ‘eternal life’. It is the life that we can enjoy while physically sick and it cannot be taken from us even by physical death.

We watch Jesus, therefore, as he seeks the man out. He finds him in the temple, from which he was previously excluded because of his sickness (see Leviticus 21:18; 2Samuel 5:8). Jesus tells him that he has given him more than physical life and warns him to live accordingly. The something worse that could happen to him is the ‘death’ of which Jesus will shortly be speaking with his opponents, a death caused by sin. We read in the First Letter of John (3:9):

Those who have been born of God do not sin,  
because God's seed abides in them; they cannot  
sin, because they have been born of God.

When the man finds out that it was Jesus who healed him, he goes back to ‘the Jews’. Scholars interpret this in different ways. Some see his going away from Jesus (rather than following him) as an indication of a failure to believe, and they see his telling the Jews as reporting Jesus and so occasioning persecution. In this understanding, he is a symbol for those in the Christian community who reverted to Judaism in time of persecution. Others see him as someone who responds to Jesus’ seeking him out by announcing the good news to his fellow countrymen.

The centre of attention is on the following statement by Jesus which is the same, in whichever way we interpret this man’s behaviour.

### Act III Scene 2. Jesus the Son of God

Jesus is standing alone, facing a hostile group of Jewish leaders. This is the first of a series of debates between Jesus and those responsible for the opposition which led to his condemnation and death. The Synoptic Gospels agree that it was ‘doing such things on the Sabbath’ that led to Jesus being hounded by those who saw themselves as responsible for ensuring fidelity to the covenant (see also Mark 3:1-6).

Because people were born on the Sabbath (and only God can give life), and because people died on the Sabbath (and so were judged by God), the Rabbis argued that God’s rest on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:11) was not absolute. God continued to give life and to judge on the Sabbath. God’s chosen people, however, for reasons already given, were bound by the regulations of the Law.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus defends his healing on the Sabbath by reminding his opponents of exceptions to the Sabbath regulations which can be found in their own Scriptures. He goes further in claiming to be ‘lord of the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:28). John takes us to the heart of Jesus’ identity with the Word. Jesus goes on working because God, whom he calls ‘my Father’, goes on working.

‘The Jews’ are furious. Jesus is not only breaking the Sabbath law and therefore, in their judgment, refusing to obey God, he is blaspheming: he is claiming for himself what belongs to God. Blasphemy is to be punished by death (Leviticus 24:16). They determine to kill him.

In this way John goes to the key reason for the Jewish rejection of Jesus and so of Christianity. His actions on the Sabbath may have started their opposition, but it was his divine claims that horrified them, committed as they were to monotheism. John will show that they were wrong in thinking that Jesus was attacking monotheism or that he was ‘making himself equal to God’. But they were right in picking up his claim to divinity and John makes no apology for it. Jesus really is claiming to be one with God whom he calls ‘Father’ because he and the Father are one in a perfect communion of love. Jesus claims to know God and to see him, being one with him. It is precisely this divine life that he has come to share with us.

**<sup>16</sup>Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath.**

**<sup>17</sup>But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is still working, and I also am working.’**

**<sup>18</sup>For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.**

**<sup>19</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.**

**<sup>20</sup>The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished.**

**<sup>21</sup>Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes.**

They accuse him of 'making himself equal to God'. Two things must be said. The first is that Jesus is not 'making himself' anything. All he has he has received from God. The life which Jesus experiences is the life of the Word now incarnate. It is human expression of the life of love received before creation by the Word who was 'with God', who 'was God'(1:1). The second is that 'equal' is their word, not his. His claim is that he is one with God in a unity of complete love.

When Moses was challenged concerning the authenticity of his claim to be God's envoy, he replied: 'This is how you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works; it has not been of my own accord'(Numbers 16:28). Jesus makes the same claim, adding that as Son he enjoys a unique intimacy with the Father. He can reveal God because he sees him (1:18; compare 6:46; 8:38). Far from proudly setting himself up against his Father, he is completely obedient, doing only what he sees his Father doing (see 4:34). On the Sabbath, as already noted, God gives life and judges. Jesus will go on to claim that his Father has given both these roles to him.

This is so because his Father loves the Son (Greek: *phileô*). Later in prayer he will say to his Father: 'You loved (Greek: *agapaô*) me before the foundation of the world'(17:4). In using *phileô* in this text, John seems to be highlighting the intimacy of the friendship between the Father and the Son. The Father gives love. The Word receives this love and responds in love. Jesus is the incarnation of the Word, the Son. Through actions such as the one to which they are objecting, he is revealing to them what he sees his Father doing in the world.

They have seen him give life to a sick man (and we have also seen him give life to the official's son). They should not be surprised. God is the source of all life and is continually offering life to those who are 'dead', that is to say, to those who do not enjoy the communion with God which alone is true life. It is to give this life that God, the Father, has sent Jesus, his Son.

Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

– Ezekiel 33:11

When Jesus approached the sick man at the pool of Beth-zatha, his opening words were ‘Do you want to be made well?’ (5:6). God is the source of all life and it is this life that Jesus offers to anyone who chooses to welcome it. Being a life of love it cannot be imposed. To be in love it is essential that we freely receive love and freely choose to respond with love. God gives to us the choice to receive or to reject his gift. This brings up the subject of judgment.

God is not giving life with one hand and judgment with the other: ‘the Father judges no one’. God gives life. Judgment is what happens when we reject his offer. Since the life that God is offering is the intimate life of love which he as Father enjoys with his Son, if we reject the Son we reject life. In this sense ‘the Father has given all judgment to the Son’.

Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God

– John 3:18

We believe in Jesus to the extent that we ‘abide in him’ (1John 2:28). We abide in him to the extent that we do not sin (1John 3:4-6) and especially to the extent that we love one another (1John 3:14). We cannot bypass the Son. To reject him is to reject the One who loves him (compare Luke 10:16; also John 15:23; 1John 2:23).

Verses twenty-four and twenty-five both begin with the words ‘Very truly, I tell you’. It may be, as we noted in the Introduction (page 25), that this is John’s way of indicating an actual saying of Jesus. Those who hear Jesus’ word and believe in his Father whose mission he is carrying out are already experiencing a life that is not confined to this world but is a sharing in God’s own divine life. Those who are dead, in the sense of existing in a state of separation from God the source of all life (compare Ephesians 2:1), are already hearing God’s Word summoning them to life, like the lost boy in Jesus’ parable, who ‘was dead and has come to life’ (Luke 15:32).

As we listen to Jesus’ majestic words, we recall John’s earlier reflections: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’ (3:16),

**<sup>22</sup>The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, <sup>23</sup>so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Anyone who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him.**

**<sup>24</sup>Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.**

**<sup>25</sup>Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.**

**<sup>26</sup>For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself;**

**<sup>27</sup>and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.**

**<sup>28</sup>Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice <sup>29</sup>and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.**

In identifying Jesus as the Son of Man John is making two points. Firstly he is reminding us that the one who brings life to us now is the one who stands with the poor and the broken and with them is vindicated by God. It is precisely because in Jesus the Word of God is made ‘flesh’ (1:14), and so shares our human condition and knows our frailty, that God ‘has given all judgment to the Son’. Like the man beside the pool, however hopeless our situation may appear, we do have someone whose word can bring us life; we do have a saviour. Secondly, he is asserting that, though belief in Jesus does bring now an experience of eternal life, the fullness of this life must await our own death and resurrection (compare 1John 3:2).

Jesus moves from speaking of the spiritually ‘dead’ to those who are ‘in their graves’. Traditionally, the Jews, like their neighbours, assumed that at death a person went to the underworld (*Sheol*, the Greek *Hades*). Here the dead person was imagined as continuing in an existence that was shadowy and lifeless. There are indications of this idea in the sacred Scriptures:

My soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.

– Psalm 88:3-5

At the same time, people longed for an enduring relationship with God, who would somehow preserve them from death and Sheol:

My heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

– Psalm 16:9-11; see also Psalm 49:15

I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

– Psalm 73:23-26

It was this faith in the fidelity of God that grew into an explicit belief that God would raise to life after death those who put their trust in God and were faithful to the covenant. The historical situation that brought about this conviction was the martyrdom of many pious Jews at the time of the Syrian persecutions (168-165BC). It seemed impossible for God not to reward with life those who gave their lives so heroically for their faith. The first explicit statements concerning the resurrection from the dead belong to this period:

At that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

– Daniel 12:1-2 (see 2Maccabees 7)

The resurrection from the dead is very different from the Greek notion of the continuance beyond death of the soul. The Pharisees and others believed that the whole human person in some way would be given fullness of life again by God. In this passage, Jesus is claiming to be the one who will give this life-beyond-death to all who believe in him and who recognise the gift of God. More than that, he is claiming that this life is not something for which we must wait. It is being offered here and now to all who believe in him, for it is a life of communion with God, and Jesus is inviting us to be with him ‘close to the Father’s heart’(1:18).

The religious authorities see themselves as judging Jesus. Ironically, the reverse is the truth. Jesus is the one chosen by God to reveal God to the world, and this includes revealing God’s judgment. In refusing to see in Jesus’ actions the revelation of God’s beauty, and in refusing to praise God for God’s healing action, the religious leaders are failing to give glory to God. They are refusing to come into the light, because their actions are evil (see 3:19-20). By their rejection of Jesus and their determination to take his life they stand condemned. The final statement calls to mind the words of Daniel: ‘Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt’(Daniel 12:2; compare Romans 2:6-8; Matthew 25:31-46).

Commenting on this passage, Augustine writes:

We see people who are so in love with this life which is bound by time and which must come to an end and they work in such a way for it that when fear of death is upon them they do all within their power not to make death disappear but to delay it. If we spend so much effort, so much care, and do so much in order to live a little longer, what ought we do when it is a matter of living forever? If we consider prudent those who do all they can to put death off and to obtain a few more days, how senseless are those who live in such a way that they forfeit the day that is eternal.

– De Verbo Domini, sermon 64

**<sup>30</sup>I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.**

Once again Jesus rejects the claim of his opponents that he is 'making himself equal to God'(5:18). He repeats his earlier assertion: 'I can do nothing on my own'(see 5:19). Jesus' only concern is to do his Father's will. For Jesus, the way to salvation and so to life is through this obedience (see 4:34; 5:19). This is traditional teaching in Judaism, as is the conviction that God's will is a loving one. Jeremiah, speaking for God, could write: 'Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope'(Jeremiah 29:11)

What is new about Jesus' teaching is his understanding of the universal scope of God's love, as well as of God's amazing intimacy with each and every person. Jesus calls everyone to do God's will because he is convinced of the delicate personal love that God has for all. The central importance of this teaching of Jesus is clear from the whole of the New Testament, and from the constant tradition of the Christian community. We are all called to an 'obedience of faith'(Romans 1:5). Jesus does what he sees his Father doing. We are called to do the same. But we can do so only if we see the Father, and for this we need the revelation given us by his Son.

According to Jewish legal practice witnessing for oneself was not accepted as valid. One needed to find other witnesses to verify the truth of one's testimony. Later the Pharisees will object to Jesus' claims precisely on this basis (see 8:13). The same objection is to be understood here. As we shall observe later, Jesus does not accept this objection in his own case (see 8:14). Here, however, he accepts the general principle and asserts the claim that he has 'another' who testifies for him. This other is God himself (compare 8:17-18) who witnesses in three ways to the truth to which Jesus is testifying.

He does so firstly through John the Baptist who was 'sent by God as a witness to testify to the light' (1:6-7). We have already heard the testimony of the Baptist (1:15,19, 32-34; 3:26). Significant as it is, it might be argued that it is only 'human testimony'. As such Jesus declares that he is not basing his case upon it (compare 1John 5:9). At the same time, he reminds his opponents that for a while they were willing to rejoice in the light offered by this burning and shining lamp.

**<sup>31</sup>If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true** [acceptable as valid in law].

**<sup>32</sup>There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true.**

**<sup>33</sup>You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth.**

**<sup>34</sup>Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved.**

**<sup>35</sup>He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.**

**<sup>36</sup>But I have a testimony greater than John's.**

**The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me.**

**<sup>37</sup>And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, <sup>38</sup>and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent.**

**<sup>39</sup>You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf.**

**<sup>40</sup>Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.**

God testifies to Jesus secondly through what Jesus is doing. His actions prove that he is sent by the Father (see also 10:25; 14:10-11). The healing of the sick man by the pool of Beth-zatha is an example. We recall a similar claim made by Jesus in response to a query posed by the disciples of the Baptist. They asked Jesus: 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' and Jesus answered, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them'(Matthew 11:3-5).

Thirdly, God testifies to Jesus through the relationship which he has with him as his Father. Those who are accusing Jesus of blasphemy have 'never heard God's voice'. If they would only listen to Jesus, they could do so (see 1John 5:9-10). Unlike Moses (Numbers 12:8), they have 'never seen God's form'. If they would only believe, they could see it in Jesus, for he is 'God the only Son'(1:18). They 'do not have God's word abiding in them'. In this they are continuing the failure of their ancestors 'who did not accept God's Word'(1:11). By refusing to believe the one God has sent, they are rejecting God's testimony.

The Father's witness to Jesus can be found in their own Scriptures which witness to him. They 'search the Scriptures' looking for life and here before them stands the life-giver himself (1:4) 'whom they do not know' (1:26).

They are determined to kill him because they ‘do not have the love of God’ in them. In rejecting Jesus they are rejected God’s love for them (see 3:16). Further-more, the reason for their rejection of Jesus is that they do not love God. They are unwilling to listen to Jesus because of the demands his words make on their behaviour. They stand under the condemnation uttered earlier:

This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

– John 3:19-20

Jesus accepts only the glory that comes from God . They take pride in the Scriptures as if they owned them, and they seek honour for their expertise in interpreting them. They are concerned with trying to impress each other and to ensure their own honour (see also 12:43). They do not need Jesus to accuse them. They stand accused by the very Scriptures of which they claim to be the guardians and in which they place their hopes. As the following scenes will illustrate, their behaviour demonstrates that, for all their posturing, they do not believe the Scriptures, for the Scriptures are God’s gift and they are meant to lead to communion with God – the very communion which Jesus is offering them. We are reminded of Paul’s comment:

Their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

– 2Corinthians 3:14-16

They claim to be the official interpreters of Moses, but they do not believe what Moses wrote. Is it any wonder that they do not believe Jesus?

**<sup>41</sup>I do not accept glory from human beings.**

**<sup>42</sup>But I know that you do not have the love of God in you.**

**<sup>43</sup>I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him.**

**<sup>44</sup>How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God?**

**<sup>45</sup>Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope.**

**<sup>46</sup>If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.**

**<sup>47</sup>But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?’**

**<sup>1</sup>After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias.**

**<sup>2</sup>A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.**

**<sup>3</sup>Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.**

### **Act III Scene 3. The Messianic banquet**

We see Jesus with a group of his disciples. The narrator informs us that they are on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. This large inland sea is part of the north Jordan waterway. In ancient times it was called Chinnereth after a nearby walled town. At the time of Jesus it was also referred to as the Lake of Gennesaret (Luke 5:1) after the valley lying to its northwest. Our first record of its being called the 'Sea of Galilee' is in the gospels. Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee at the time of Jesus, had the city of Tiberias constructed on its western shore (c.25AD), and the political and economic importance of this city was such that by the time John is writing the lake was often named in reference to it (see also 21:1). Some ancient manuscripts read 'to the shore of Tiberias' which would locate this scene near Herod's city (see 6:23). This fits with the tradition dating from the fourth century which locates the site at modern Et-Tabgha.

A large crowd enters. We are told that they are following Jesus 'because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick'. We already know that Jesus is wary of this kind of following (see 2:23-25; 4:48). Their interest in him has been aroused, but they do not yet believe in him. John tells us that Jesus went up 'the mountain' and sat down there with his disciples. Matthew uses similar language to introduce the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1). We are meant to think of Mount Sinai. We have just been listening to Jesus speaking of Moses and the sacred Scriptures (5:46). He is about to reveal himself as the one who brings to its completion the revelation given through Moses: 'The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (1:17). It is not the Law that Jesus is offering them, it is himself. This is also the mountain of the promised Messianic banquet:

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. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces ... It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us ... let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

– Isaiah 35:6-10.

As a final observation to set the scene, John tells us that ‘the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near’(compare 2:13). Jesus the teacher and the master of symbolic prophetic action is about to reveal the way God wills to redeem his people and the nourishment that God wills to give us as we journey to the Promised Land. Jesus is the new Moses bringing about a new redemption and celebrating it in a new covenant meal in which he is offering himself as the new Passover Lamb (1:29, 36). He will offer himself in love to assuage our deepest hunger and to nourish us for our journey to the intimate communion with God which is eternal life. These ideas will be developed by John in the reflection which follows (6:27ff).

Jesus looks up and sees a large crowd. The description echoes an earlier scene in which Jesus tells his disciples to look up and see the people of Shechem whom he describes as being ‘ripe for harvesting’ (4:35). They are ‘coming toward Jesus’ – the first step to becoming disciples (1:39,46; 4:29). Notice that Jesus is the one who takes the initiative. Jesus’ question echoes that of Moses just before the miracle of the manna: ‘Where am I to get meat to give to all this people?’(Numbers 11:13). Though Jesus asks a question, John is quick to remind us that he knows the answer. John never allows us to forget that we are watching the divine Word-made-flesh (see the Introduction, pages 25-28). Jesus is going to show that he has the power to satisfy our hunger, a hunger, as we shall see, that is for something far more important than bread. The dialogue between Jesus and two of his disciples, Philip and Andrew (already introduced in 1:35-51 and linked also in 12:21-22), echoes that between the prophet Elisha and his servant:

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.’ 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.

– 2Kings 4:42-44 (compare 1Kings 17:8-16)

**<sup>4</sup>Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.**

**<sup>5</sup>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?’**

**<sup>6</sup>He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.**

**<sup>7</sup>Philip answered him, ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.’**

**<sup>8</sup>One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him,**

**<sup>9</sup>‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?’**

**<sup>10</sup>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.**

**<sup>11</sup>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.**

**<sup>12</sup>When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.'**

**<sup>13</sup>So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.**

**<sup>14</sup>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.'**

**<sup>15</sup>When Jesus realised that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.**

Jesus is revealing himself as the one who fulfils the word of God spoken through the prophets. He also fulfils the mission given by God to Moses. Jesus' action, as will be made explicit later in John's reflection, recalls God's gift of manna from heaven to the hungry people journeying through the wilderness (Exodus 16 and Numbers 11).

Everyone is invited to share the banquet promised by the prophets:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

– Isaiah 55:2-3

In words that remind us of Jesus' words at the last supper (recorded in the Synoptics though not in John), Jesus thanks his Father and personally feeds the hungry crowd. The people eat and are 'satisfied'. The Good Shepherd is looking after his flock: they 'shall not want' (Psalm 23:1). The manna could not be stored; it perished (Exodus 16:19-20). Not so the food that Jesus offers. The disciples collect the fragments in obedience to Jesus' word and they fill twelve baskets. Because of the constellations in the zodiac, the number twelve is used in the Scriptures to represent universality in the heavenly aspect – that is, fullness by divine design. The twelve tribes signify the fullness of God's people, a symbolism carried on by Jesus when 'he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach' (Mark 3:14).

On their own the disciples were unable to assuage the people's hunger. 'Five barley loaves and two fish – what are they among so many people?' Jesus, the new Moses, is teaching them that if they place their resources in his hands, he can bring it about that not only are the hungry 'satisfied' but that his disciples will have enough to continue doing what Jesus has done.

Jesus is showing them that when we place our lives in his hands and when we ‘give thanks’ (Greek: *eucharisteô*) we all have the resources to do the will of God and so to satisfy people’s real hunger, which is to be ‘close to the Father’s heart’ (1:18).

The people were attracted to Jesus ‘because they saw the signs’ (6:2). Their faith is no deeper at the end. When Moses was about to die he promised: ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people’ (Deuteronomy 18:15). The crowd wonder if Jesus might be this prophet, the one ‘who is to come into the world’. Jesus has already accepted this identification from the Samaritan woman (4:26), but he resists the royal Messianic hopes of the Galilean crowd.

As we watch this scene we are reminded of the Eucharist, the Passover meal of the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus at the Last Supper. John will reflect on the meaning of this meal too in the homiletic meditation which follows the next scene.

The miraculous feeding is found also in all the Synoptic Gospels. Both Mark and Matthew for their own purposes choose to record two slightly variant versions (see Matthew 14:13-21; 15:29-38; Mark 6:31-44; 8:1-19; Luke 9:10-19). These accounts, like that of John, are highly symbolic in their allusions to the sacred Scriptures and to the life and liturgy of the early Christian community. This compounds the difficulty we always have in getting behind the language in which the Gospel scenes are portrayed to the event or events in Jesus’ life upon which they are based. As noted in the Introduction, the Gospel writers are not interested in giving us a simple accurate account of events. They are sharing with their readers the insights into the meaning of Jesus’ words and actions which his disciples were privileged to receive during the years in which they shared their lives with him. They are also sharing what they and later disciples came to understand about Jesus when they reflected back over Jesus’ death and resurrection.

We have to live with the fact that we cannot be sure exactly what happened by the Sea of Galilee. In some miraculous way hungry people were fed by Jesus. Of their nature miracles are impressive, but we would do well to reflect on the comment offered on this scene by Augustine:

The governance of the whole world is a greater miracle than the satisfying of five thousand men from five loaves. Yet, at the former miracles no one is amazed; at the latter one, people are amazed, not because it is greater but because it is rare.

– Tractate 24.1.2 on John

As John will make abundantly clear in the dialogue that comes after the following scene, he wants his readers to ‘come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name’ (20:31). The hunger John is interested in is not a hunger for the bread that nourishes our body. The gift John is interested in is not bread for the body but Jesus’ ‘flesh for the life of the world’ (6:51).

It is I; do not be afraid

**<sup>16</sup>When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, <sup>17</sup>got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum.**

**It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.**

**<sup>18</sup>The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.**

**<sup>19</sup>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.**

**<sup>20</sup>But he said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.'**

**<sup>21</sup>Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.**

#### **Act III Scene 4. Jesus is mysteriously present to his disciples**

This scene is linked to the previous one also in Mark (6:47-52) and Matthew (14:22-34). The festival of Passover (see 6:4) celebrates the escape from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea and the journey through the desert to the Promised Land, a journey made possible by the manna miraculously provided by God. In the Exodus tradition the crossing (Exodus 14:15-31; Psalm 78:13) precedes the miraculous feeding (Exodus 16; Psalm 78:17-31). In the Gospel narratives the scenes are reversed. It is the nourishment from heaven that makes possible the journey to freedom.

John tells us that the disciples set off by boat for Capernaum. 'Jesus had *not yet* come to them'. He is on the mountain alone (therefore with his Father, 8:29, 16:32). It is dark and the sea is rough. John seems to be using the boat as a symbol of his own community, struggling in this world, with Jesus no longer visibly present (but we are assured that he will come). Then, suddenly and mysteriously, Jesus appears to them.

It is the divine Jesus who walks on the sea and comes to them. His words 'It is I' are the same *egô eimi* that we noted in Jesus' response to the Samaritan woman (4:26), though here the connection with the name *Yahweh*, the divine name of the redeemer God of the Exodus, is more obvious (see Exodus 3:11-15 and Isaiah 43:8-13). The accompanying words 'Do not be afraid' occur regularly in the theophanies narrated in the Scriptures. We are watching God walking upon the waters of chaos (Psalm 77:19; Job 9:8; 38:16; Sirach 24:5-6). We recall the following passage from the Isaiah scroll:

Thus says the Lord, he who created you O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters,  
I will be with you.

– Isaiah 43:1-2

The disciples reach their goal without Jesus actually getting into the boat. Their readiness to welcome him is enough. He has reassured them that he is with them. They are secure in their faith that he who is on the mountain with his Father is truly with them.

John is capturing in this mysterious theophany the experience of the community of Jesus' disciples after Jesus' crucifixion. He is assuring us that even though Jesus is no longer with us in the way he was before his death, he is still caring for the community. We will be safe and we will reach our goal if we do not lose faith in him.

A further reflection is inspired by the fact that the disciples set out in the evening, but Jesus waits till it is dark and they have rowed well out onto the sea before he comes to them. There is a divine wisdom in the timing of grace, and it seems that we all must go through a dark night to make us realise that we are totally incapable of reaching our destination on our own, and we are quite incapable, on our own, of letting go and admitting our own powerlessness. There seems to be no other way to learn this lesson, except to be made to face the darkness alone. If we are willing to dare this journey into the night, God will not release us from it till our entire being cries out for that release and recognises that God alone can effect it. Yet how strange it is that we, like the disciples, respond in fear at the approach of the one who comes to save us. John of the Cross writes:

How amazing and pitiful it is that the soul is so utterly weak and impure that the hand of God, though light and gentle, should feel so heavy and contrary. For the hand of God does not press down or weigh upon the soul, but only touches it; and this mercifully, for God's aim is to grant it favour and not to chastise it.

– The Dark Night II,7

The impurities of our loving cannot simply be overlooked if our heart is to be formed according to the heart of the one whose disciples we are called to be. Love is a fire. The impurities in our hearts and in our lives must be devoured, till there remains only the fire of love. This is true for each of us. It is true for the disciples in the boat, who symbolically represent all of us who want to belong to the community of Jesus' disciples. Jesus does come to them. They want him to be with them. They learn that in a mysterious way he is, and because he is with them they reach their destination.

**<sup>22</sup>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.**

**<sup>23</sup>Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks.**

**<sup>24</sup>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.**

**<sup>25</sup>When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?'**

**<sup>26</sup>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.**

### **Act III Scene 5. Jesus and the Passover**

We are in the synagogue at Capernaum. Jesus is there as also are people who witnessed the multiplication of the loaves and have come across by boat looking for him. They were unable to find him at the place 'where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks' (Greek *eucharisteô*; compare 6:11). The Eucharistic allusion is obvious (see 1Corinthians 11:23-24). This is also the first time that John has referred to Jesus as 'the Lord' (though see the text of Isaiah cited 1:23). He is continually contemplating the risen Christ as he writes. The crowd's response to finding Jesus reinforces the mysterious nature of Jesus' presence in his apparition to his disciples.

Jesus' opening words beginning 'Very truly, I tell you' serve to refine a comment made earlier by John when he told us that Jesus was not impressed by those who 'believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing' (2:23). Jesus tells this crowd: 'you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves'. In other words, though they were impressed by what was in fact a sign (impressed enough to want to make him king), they did not go beyond the action to its real sign value.

Jesus has already told us that his food is to do the will of the one who sent him and to complete his mission (4:32). Jesus invites the people to get in touch with a deeper hunger for food that can nourish a life that is not bound within the confines of space and time but that comes from God. This is the life he wants for them. As the Son of Man (see 1:51) he knows the hunger in their souls and he offers to feed them. The distinction which Jesus draws between ‘food that perishes’ and ‘food that endures to eternal life’ reminds us of the following words from Isaiah:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

– Isaiah 55:2-3

It reminds us too of the distinction Jesus made earlier between the water from Jacob’s well which leaves people thirsty and the water which he is offering, ‘a spring of water gushing up to eternal life’ (4:14). The food image and the water image are both echoed in words written by Ignatius of Antioch to the Christian community in Rome early in the second century:

There is left no spark of desire for mundane things, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, ‘Come to the Father’. There is no pleasure for me in anything that perishes, or in the delights of this life. My heart longs for the bread of God – the flesh of Jesus Christ; and for my drink I crave that blood of his which is undying love.

– Letter to the Romans 6,1-2

Jesus can give us this divine life because ‘it is on him that God the Father has set his seal’. He is consecrated to the Lord (Exodus 22:31) and his Father has stamped his seal of approval on his words and deeds. God’s Spirit remains on him (1:32,39). Because of his great love for the world, ‘God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’(3:16; see also 3:15; 4:14; 5:24). If we want food for eternal life we must come to him.

It is important to note that this gift is given by ‘the Son of Man’(see commentary on 1:51). As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says: ‘Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him’(Hebrews 5:8-9). He has life as the Son of God. It is his Father’s will that as the Son of Man, sharing our human condition, Jesus will give us this life.

**<sup>27</sup>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.’**

**<sup>28</sup>Then they said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?'**

**<sup>29</sup>Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'**

**<sup>30</sup>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?**

**<sup>31</sup>Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."'**

**<sup>32</sup>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.'**

**<sup>33</sup>For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'**

**<sup>34</sup>They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.'**

The crowd are used to thinking of God's word, found in the Torah, as life-giving food, so they ask Jesus what they must do to please God. John has already stressed the importance of obedience: ['Do whatever he tells you' (2:5), 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me'(4:34)]. However, while obedience is essential, it cannot achieve life: life is a 'gift of God' (4:10).

Jesus responds to their question by saying that what God wants of them is that they 'believe in him whom he has sent' (compare Acts 16:30-31). It is important to remember that belief is, indeed, a 'work', for it is a commitment to receive God's gift and to live accordingly. Believing in Jesus includes a commitment to do God's will especially by loving one another (see 1John 3:23). As Saint Paul wrote to the Galatians: 'The only thing that counts is faith working through love'(Galatians 5:6).

Jesus asks them to believe in him as the 'Son of Man' (6:27). It is as one who stands in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed that he reveals God as the Lord who hears the cry of the poor. This point will be made more clearly in 6:51, and it is this that the crowd and even many of Jesus' disciples will find too hard to accept (6:60).

They ask Jesus for a sign that would show them that he was, indeed, the one sent by God to give them the food that would unite them to God and they cite the sign given their ancestors by Moses, quoting from Exodus 16:4,15: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'. Jesus tells them that the 'He' referred to in the text from Exodus is not Moses but God, and that the 'true bread from heaven', the only bread really worthy of the name (Greek: *alêthinos*) because it satisfies our deepest hunger, is not something given in the past but something being given now by God, whom Jesus calls 'my Father'. Finally, it is not given just to them but to the world. Like the Samaritan woman (4:15) they want what he is offering, but without understanding him.

We have already observed Jesus' use of the expression 'I am' (Greek: *egô eimi*) in response to the Samaritan woman (4:26) and to his disciples on the lake (6:20). Here the expression does not stand alone but indicates one aspect of the way in which Jesus, 'God the only Son' (1:18), as 'the Lord' (6:23), the redeemer and 'Saviour of the world' (4:42), relates to us: 'I am the bread of life'. It is the first of seven such statements: 'I am the light of the world' (8:12); 'I am the gate for the sheep' (10:7); 'I am the good shepherd' (10:11); 'I am the resurrection and the life' (11:25); 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' (14:6); 'I am the true vine' (15:1).

The people are coming to Jesus because they are hungry. Even though they do not know it, their hunger is the one spoken of by the prophet Amos: 'The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord' (Amos 8:11). The prophets looked forward to the Messianic banquet in which our longing for complete communion with God would be satisfied (see Isaiah 55:2-3 just quoted; also commentary on John 2:1-12).

Jesus wants to remind them that 'one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:3), and he wants them to believe that he is this life-giving Word. In the Introduction we noted that throughout his Gospel John is presenting Jesus as the human revelation of the Wisdom of God. We see this in the present passage. Sirach has Wisdom say: 'Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more' (Sirach 24:21). Those who have tasted divine Wisdom as made known in the partial revelation of the 'Law and the Prophets' will want more of it. Jesus is the one sent by God to fully satisfy this hunger: 'Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty' (compare 4:13-14).

His mission is to share with us the communion with his Father which is his life: 'If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me' (Revelation 3:20).

<sup>35</sup>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.'

**<sup>36</sup>But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.**

**<sup>37</sup>Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; <sup>38</sup>for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.**

**<sup>39</sup>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.**

**<sup>40</sup>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.'**

The text from Exodus cited by the people (6:31) is in the third person: 'He gave *them* bread from heaven to eat'. Jesus has already identified the 'He' as God, insisted on the present 'gives' rather than the past 'gave' and on the universality of God's offer. Now he moves from the third to the second person: '*you* have seen me and yet do not believe'. They have asked for a sign 'so that we may see it and believe you' (6:30). Jesus has already challenged them for seeking him, not in response to the drawing of grace, but because of their superficial hunger (see 6:26).

They are seeking a sign, but he himself is the sign. He is God's word sent from heaven to carry out God's will. We think of Isaiah's words:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

– Isaiah 55:10-11

Jesus appeals to them to follow the Father's attraction and to come to him. He will welcome them by giving them eternal life now and by raising them on the last day.

The experience of the Exodus, which gave the people of Israel their basic insight into God and their basic insight into their identity as a people, was a mighty act of God, or as they preferred to call it a 'Day of the Lord'. On that 'day' God was revealed as one who hears the cry of the poor and oppressed, and delivers them from slavery (Exodus 3:7-8). On that 'day' the Lord, the God of mercy and compassion, liberated them through Moses, formed them into a people, made a covenant with them, and led them towards the Promised Land. They believed that it was the Lord who, again and again in their history, delivered them from oppression. Two notable 'days of the Lord' were the miraculous saving of Jerusalem from the Assyrian army which had already overrun the northern kingdom and most of Judah (701BC, 2Kings 18:13 – 19:37), and the deliverance of the Babylonian exiles through Cyrus of Persia (538BC, 2Chronicles 36:22-23).

Catastrophes in their history were also understood as ‘days of the Lord’, for God could not allow injustice to triumph, and so was seen as punishing them for their infidelity to the covenant. One such ‘day’ was the untimely death of the saintly king Josiah in the battle of Megiddo (609BC, 2Kings 23:29-30), a death seen as punishment for the sins of his grandfather, Manasseh. Another was the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army (587BC, 2Kings 25:9).

Many of the prophetic scrolls include passages which look forward to a final ‘day of the Lord’, the ‘last day’, when all evil will be destroyed and good will ultimately be vindicated by God. It is to this that Jesus is referring here. He is the one who will bring about this definitive liberation ‘when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live’(5:25). The eternal life that will be given on the last day (compare 5:29) is being offered *now* by Jesus (6:47; compare 5:24). If we draw our nourishment from him we will not ‘die’(6:5); we will ‘live forever’(6:51).

God wants us to live, not die: ‘God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him’(3:16-17). This is why God is attracting us to come to Jesus. God loves us, God made us for love and God wants to make of us a gift of love to his Son. We can be sure that Jesus will never turn us away, for his only desire is to carry out the mission given him by his Father: ‘for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me’(6:38; see 4:34; 5:19; 5:30).

**<sup>41</sup>Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.'**

**<sup>42</sup>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"?''**

**<sup>43</sup>Jesus answered them, 'Do not complain among yourselves. <sup>44</sup>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.**

**<sup>45</sup>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.**

**<sup>46</sup>Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.**

**<sup>47</sup>Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.**

The crowd is symbolic of those who rejected Jesus and so John refers to them as 'the Jews' (see 1:19). Like their ancestors in the desert they begin to 'complain' (see Numbers 11:1; Exodus 16:2,7,8; 1 Corinthians 10:10). They claim to know Jesus' origin (see 1:45; compare Luke 4:22), but their knowledge is superficial. Jesus invites them in the words of Isaiah to be 'taught by God' (Isaiah 54:13). If they listen to God's word they will recognise Jesus as the Word-made-flesh whose origin is from the Father. They will come to him and believe in him and find life. Their ancestors ate the manna and still died. Jesus is inviting them to 'eat' him, to let his revelation of God nourish their souls, so that they will 'live'.

When Jesus says that everyone who listens to the Father comes to him, we are not to conclude that those who do not explicitly acknowledge and come to Jesus are not listening to God. He is addressing those to whom he is offering himself in person. The problem which we face is that Jesus is often presented to others in a distorted way. To reject a distorted Jesus, as some people wisely do, is not to reject Jesus. It is also true that throughout history and still in our world many people live in a situation such that Jesus is not effectively offered to them at all. They may know of him, but they do not know him and so they do not reject him.

Though Jesus does choose disciples to reveal him to others, and though he has given to the community of his disciples the mission to reveal him to the ends of the world and has promised to grace this mission (see Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:20), he is not bound by our failure or by the limits imposed on the community by time and space. As he will promise later: 'I will draw everyone to myself' (12:32). The Spirit of Jesus breathes where he chooses (3:8). Jesus is drawing everyone in this world to himself in ways that remain mysterious to us. The Father is drawing everyone to his Son. The judgment as to who is truly listening is best left to God.

Jesus has been speaking of himself as the true bread *from heaven* and has been inviting the people to believe in him. Now he speaks of himself as *life-giving bread* which he is offering as a communion sacrifice for them to *eat*. If they nourish themselves on his word, indeed on his person as the Word, they will live forever.

He tells them again (see 6:33) that he is giving this bread ‘for the life of the world’. We recall the way he was introduced by John the Baptist as ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (1:29; compare 1John 2:2). We recall the song of joy: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’ (3:16), and the enthusiastic cry of the people of Shechem: ‘This is truly the Saviour of the world’ (4:42).

Secondly, he tells them that the bread that he is giving is his ‘flesh’ (see 1:14). By this he means his weakness, his vulnerability, his acceptance of the human condition with its pains and disappointments, but also with its utter dependence on the Spirit of God if it is to experience life. It is the ‘flesh’ that connects us. It is the ‘flesh’ that draws us together in our common dependence upon God. We give our ‘flesh’ to someone when we give ourselves in all that it means to be part of the human condition. It means to give our time, our activity, our energy, our work. It means to give our real self in all its weakness. It means to keep loving them even when it causes us pain.

The crowd hesitate before such a teaching. Jesus repeats what he said about eating his flesh and adds that they must drink his blood. To give our ‘blood’ for someone is to give our life when it is being poured out. It means to give our heart even when it is bleeding. It means to be willing to sacrifice everything for them. It is to give them our life, our spirit, our deepest self.

By separating ‘eat the flesh’ and ‘drink the blood’ Jesus is speaking of his self-offering in terms of sacrifice. He is inviting the people to accept him in his offering of himself in love unto death for their salvation. In baulking at this, they are, in effect, baulking at the scandal of the cross, which Paul calls ‘a stumbling block to Jews’ (1Corinthians 1:23).

Jesus is offering us life (6:49). If we draw our nourishment from him we will not die but will live forever (6:50-51). He concludes with the warning that if we do not draw nourishment from him we will not live (6:53).

**48I am the bread of life.**

**49Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.**

**51I 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.’**

**52The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’**

**53So 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.’**

**<sup>54</sup>Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; <sup>55</sup>for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.**

**<sup>56</sup>Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.**

**<sup>57</sup>Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.**

**<sup>58</sup>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.'**

**<sup>59</sup>He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.**

Here Jesus defines the life which he is offering: it consists in communion with him. Jesus is continuing to offer himself as one who will give his life for us. If we open our hearts to this gift we will share in the communion which he has with the Father; we will experience eternal life.

We can rely on Jesus' offering of himself to satisfy our deepest hunger, for his flesh is real food (Greek: *alêthês*). We can rely on his life poured out for us to satisfy our deepest thirst, for his blood is real drink (Greek: *alêthês*). John's community could not hear the words spoken by Jesus in this present scene without thinking of the ritual celebration of the Eucharist in which they 'proclaimed the Lord's death' (1Corinthians 11:26). This Eucharistic reference has been there as a secondary motif from the beginning of the discourse. Here John brings it to the fore by sharing his reflections on the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection and so of the Eucharist in which this paschal event is ritually celebrated.

At the last supper Jesus '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). He is sharing with us the intimate life-communion which he has with God as 'the only Son who is close to the Father's heart'(1:18). Indeed, it was for this purpose that he 'became flesh and lived among us'(1:14).

As we watch him taking the bread we contemplate the Father taking Jesus into his embrace. God did this 'in the beginning'. God continued to do this during Jesus' life on earth. He did it at the Baptism, and he continued to do it, as we shall see, even when Jesus was on the cross.

As we watch Jesus giving thanks we contemplate the words of love shared between God and the Word 'in the beginning' and throughout Jesus' life.

As we watch Jesus breaking the bread we reflect on the fact that the Word truly became flesh and suffered the same kind of brokenness that we all suffer. It is part of the human condition which he assumed. As noted earlier (see the commentary on 3:14), it was not God who broke Jesus. He was broken by those who rejected him. People failed to hear his message of love. Friends turned against him in his hour of need. He was betrayed and crucified. His flesh was broken. The blood that poured from his pierced heart is the blood of the new covenant (see Exodus 24:8). This is because Jesus accepted to be broken.

When others threatened to take his life, he did not retaliate, he did not resist. He gave his life to them as a final gift of love: 'No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord'(10:18). As we watch Jesus giving the bread we contemplate the gift he gave of himself.

Jesus is inviting us to do the same. Whatever others might do to us, let us place our lives in the welcoming hands of God and thank him as we enjoy the blessing of his embrace. When our flesh is broken and our hearts are pierced we can respond by collapsing in on ourselves. This is natural and probably often unavoidable. But we can also do what Jesus did. Jesus is inviting us to 'believe in him'. He is inviting us to listen to his words, to trust what he is revealing about God and about our real hunger, and to reach out in love to others as Jesus is reaching out in love to them. This is what it means to believe.

Let us take others to our heart. Let us acknowledge them and how sacred they are, even when they fail to know this or to live up to it. They, like us, are broken in many ways. They are not able to love as they would like. They are hurting and confused. 'All flesh is grass. People are like the flower in the field. The grass withers, the flower fades'(Isaiah 40:6-7). But they have a lot to give. They have all the love in their broken hearts to give. Let us know this and honour it and learn like Jesus to welcome their gift.

Jesus is welcoming us to come to him and to join him in opening the hearts of others to believe and their arms to love. To eat his flesh and to drink his blood is to receive his offering of himself and to give ourselves to others. Everyone is hungering for 'eternal life'. We will find it through communion with Jesus, a communion realised powerfully in the Eucharist in which we abide in him and he in us (compare 15:3-7).

**<sup>60</sup>When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'**

**<sup>61</sup>But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you?'**

**<sup>62</sup>Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?**

**<sup>63</sup>It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.**

**<sup>64</sup>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.**

**<sup>65</sup>And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'**

**<sup>66</sup>Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.**

Our attention is focused no longer on the crowd generally (6:22), or on those in the crowd who reject Jesus ('the Jews', 6:41), but on Jesus' disciples. These include some who, as we learned earlier 'believed in him because they saw the signs that he was doing' (2:23), but were unwilling, as here, to go further and believe his word. Perhaps they were attracted to Jesus as being sent by God and even as being the revelation of God's Wisdom. From the words spoken now by Jesus it would seem that they balked at the idea of his giving his flesh for the life of the world (6:51). They balked, as many seeking a 'spiritual life' continue to do, at the reality of the Incarnation. We do not come to God by escaping from our humanity but by embracing it with love. We do not find God by running from the world, but by going to its heart and by taking it to ours, allowing our own hearts to be purified in the process.

In the first part of this discourse (6:35-47) Jesus spoke of himself as the one who has come down from heaven. In the second part (6:48-58) he spoke of himself as giving life by giving his flesh. Now he speaks of his ascending to heaven – something which we only know if enlightened by the 'Spirit that gives life'. As Jesus said earlier to Nicodemus: 'What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit' (3:6). The human condition in its brokenness (the 'flesh') does not of itself give life. Suffering does not of itself give life. It is the love with which Jesus offers himself that is life giving. It is the Spirit that binds him in love to the Father that makes his self-giving also life-giving.

Many of those who for various reasons had been attracted to Jesus and were following him, turned back, unwilling to accept his way of understanding his mission from God. They were scandalised by the cross. Others, as we know from the other Gospels as well, struggled in their faith but kept following Jesus. Significant among these was the group identified here for the first time as 'the twelve' (6:67; though see 6:13). Jesus turns to them.

Because there are twelve constellations in the zodiac, the number twelve was used as a symbol for the fullness of the heavens and therefore for the fullness of God's purpose. It is for this reason that the literature numbers the tribes of Israel as twelve. In Jesus the Word 'came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him' (1:11). In choosing twelve disciples, Jesus is making a prophetic statement. He has been rejected by Israel. He is establishing a renewed Israel, offering a new and truly universal covenant. Simon Peter, who received the name Peter from Jesus himself because of the role he was to have among the disciples (1:42), speaks for all those who would be faithful disciples of Jesus.

While some disciples withdraw, others, represented here by Peter, come to true faith: faith in Jesus' word (faith in Jesus the Word) as revealing God. The first to come to this faith was Jesus' mother (see 2:5). John the Baptist also listened and rejoiced to hear the voice of the bridegroom (3:29). We witnessed the people of the Samaritan city coming to this faith (4:42), as also the court official from Capernaum (4:50).

Some things can be known only by one who loves, by one who 'believes'. Others turn away because they cannot accept what Jesus is saying. Through his believing, Peter comes to know with a faith-knowing that Jesus is 'the Holy One of God'. God, the Holy One, has chosen to dwell in Jesus as in a temple (2:21). God's Holy Spirit rests on him (1:32), and it is his mission to 'baptise with the Holy Spirit' (1:33), drawing to God anyone who wishes to share in the intimate communion of love which binds Jesus to his Father.

We might have expected a joyful response from Jesus, but we are reminded instead that there was one, even among the Twelve, who not only failed to believe in Jesus but also was an instrument of the devil in betraying him (compare 13:2,27). The word Iscariot may indicate that Judas and his father Simon came from the southern Judaeian town of Kerioth. It may also be a transliteration of the Aramaic *yaskar yothê*, meaning 'he who betrays'. Though John tells us that some disciples continued to believe, his main accent here is on the tragedy of disbelief.

**<sup>67</sup>So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?'**

**<sup>68</sup>Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.**

**<sup>69</sup>We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'**

**<sup>70</sup>Jesus answered them, 'Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.'**

**<sup>71</sup>He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.**