

12. John 6:1-29

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Getting started

Have you ever witnessed a miracle? Discuss.

Observation and interpretation

Thinking about this study...

For this part of the study you will need to ask for participants a week in advance so they can think about their response. You may like to have a reporter as well.

Some background to help you assume a character in the interviews...

Jesus and the disciples cross the lake and come to a mountain where they see the large crowd that has followed on land. Jesus goes up on the mountain and teaches the crowd in the context of the impending Passover Feast. The context of the mountain, teaching and Passover recalls the experience of Moses and Israel. This is reinforced with the action of the crowd at the end of the account. They ask if this might be the prophet (the one promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 18) and then seek to make him King.

There are some unusual details recorded in Jesus' testing of his disciples with his request of Philip. Jesus' foresight and sovereignty is contrasted with the disciples' helplessness and uncertainty. The size of the crowd means the task is impossible for the impoverished disciples as Philip acknowledges in a detail that also serves to amplify the magnitude of what is about to happen. Andrew finds a young boy with his lunch. The loaves are the low quality bread of the poor and the fish are most likely some small sardine like fish to give a bit of taste to the bread. The details in the account, green grass, the amount of money is about right to feed a group like that, the poor quality of the boys lunch, the collection of uneaten food at the end etc again breathe the air of an eyewitness account that sits well within what we know of the social and historical context.

At the end 12 baskets of leftovers are collected recalling the twelve tribes of Israel. It looks like Jesus directs his own 12 as a renewed or reconstituted Israel feeding and providing for them.

The desire to make Jesus King fits in with what we know of the volatility of the times with revolutionary movements and figures around. The desire of many to rebel and break free of Roman rule was strong and Jesus' actions, so reminiscent of Moses, the great liberator of Israel makes him a likely candidate to lead and rule. Jesus will be presented as king in the Gospel but it will be on his own terms.

The sea walking incident follows next. The whole incident must have been terrifying for the disciples; first the storm and then this person walking effortlessly towards them. His words I am do not be afraid could only recall the name of the Lord in the OT and the appearances of the mysterious angel of the Lord. Walking on water was recognised at that time as a sign of divinity in a variety of religious contexts. There appears to be a second miracle as the boat arrives immediately on the shore once Jesus enters the boat. This appears to be a private manifestation to the disciples and may well be important for their own staying with Jesus at the end of the chapter. It is clearly an important moment along with the feeding as these two incidents are recorded in all Gospels. It is curious then that so little is made of the incident by John.

The journey of the crowd to find Jesus is a little confusing. The crowd that had been fed remained 'on the other side', where the feeding took place. They realise that there had only been one boat and that Jesus was not on it. Perhaps they are meant to work out that something extraordinary has happened. In any case it seems that while many might have gone home a number also stayed perhaps in the hope that Jesus

might still be around. Some boats from Tiberias came across the lake to where the crowd was. Perhaps they were blown by the storm or perhaps they had come to fetch friends and neighbours. Realising that Jesus was not around they then take off to Capernaum to try and find him. At this point Capernaum was the home base for Jesus and his disciples (2:12). The rest of the talking takes place in the synagogue at Capernaum. They do find him but their question shows they do not even conceive of the possibility of Jesus' actual mode of movement. They address him as Rabbi (teacher) although they will soon dispute his teaching. The crowd is generally confused through the Fourth Gospel. Jesus discerns their true motives for searching for him: they want more food and perhaps him to lead them in a liberation movement with no real idea of the meaning of what he has done in view. Once again an action with symbolic/spiritual significance is taken on a purely earthly level by Jesus' hearers.

Questions for Philip

Describe the situation as you saw it.

How did you feel when Jesus first approached you about getting food for the crowd?

What did you think when Andrew suggested the boy's lunch might be used?

Tell us about the events that night.

Putting the two incidents together what do you think about Jesus?

Questions for Andrew

Why did you suggest the boy and his food?

What did it look like when Jesus made the bread and fish multiply?

How did the people respond when you distributed the food?

Did the 12 baskets of leftovers mean anything do you think?

Questions for a person in the crowd

What did you think when Jesus fed the crowd?

Who did you think he might be?

What did you want him to do?

How did you feel when you couldn't find him?

Questions for a person in the crowd the next day

Take us through the sequence of events the next morning

What do you think happened during the night?

How did you feel when Jesus spoke to you at Capernaum?

What do you think about Jesus?

Implications

'If only Jesus were here today and could do some more miracles, then people would really find it easier to believe in him' What do you think of this statement on the basis of what you have been reading in John's Gospel?

What 'bread' of the world tempts to you to fill your belly and ignore the 'bread from heaven'?

Jesus' statements about eating and drinking are, amongst other things, allusions to his violent death. We do not have a saviour without the offence of the cross. In what ways do people find the cross offensive these days and how would you respond to their comments?