

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

To start this sermon, I’d like you to hear and consider what some famous people from recent history have said about Jesus:

Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Empire, said, “Jesus was the first socialist, the first to seek a better life for mankind.”

Prince Phillip, Duke of Edinburgh, said, “Jesus might be described as an under-privileged, working-class victim of political and religious persecution.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, German philosopher: “Jesus died too soon. If he had lived to my age he would have repudiated his doctrine.”

George Bernard Shaw, British author and satirist: “Whether you think Jesus was God or not, you must admit he was a first-rate political economist.”

Perhaps you noticed that all of these quotes seem to downplay, if not completely ignore, some of the boldly authoritative things that Jesus claimed for himself. By way of comparison, consider now some of these things that Jesus says about himself in Scripture:

“Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). “Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

The striking contrast of those first quotes with Jesus’ own assertions about himself is captured in this famous statement by C. S. Lewis:

”A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg -- or else he would be the devil of hell.

You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

If anyone else in history other than Jesus had said these things, we would deem him to be crazy (as C. S. Lewis has reminded us).

But because it was Jesus who made these statements, backed up by his resurrection from the dead, we must consider them with the utmost seriousness.

Today's Gospel text focuses on one of these boldly authoritative statements of Jesus. Just the day before Jesus made this announcement, he had miraculously fed more than 5,000 people, starting with only five barley loaves and two small fish.

When the people experienced this miracle, they immediately thought that they had a political treasure on their hands. Here was a man with a dynamic personality, with thousands of people already following him, and, he could miraculously produce food -- apparently out of thin air.

And so they attempted to take Jesus by force and make him their king. But Jesus would have nothing to do with their political aspirations for him. He simply left their presence, apparently untouched, and went to be alone in the mountains.

But these people wouldn't give up. They continued to look for Jesus in Capernaum, which was on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He was there because, the night before, he had miraculously met his disciples out in the middle of the sea by walking out to them on the water.

When the people caught up with him, Jesus confronted their shallow motives and rebuked them for only pursuing that which was only transitional and temporary -- namely, the satisfaction of their physical appetites.

Jesus said they needed to pursue the type of "food" which would sustain them for all of eternity -- namely, to believe in the One whom God had sent.

Jesus had used a similar metaphor with the Samaritan woman at the well (in John, chapter 4, only two chapters previous to this passage). Jesus focused on the temporal satisfaction of the well water compared to the eternal value of what he had to offer her.

Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:13-14). With physical food still on their minds, the crowd asked Jesus to produce a miracle so that they would have some sort of basis for believing in him.

Keep in mind that within the last 24 hours, Jesus had fed over 5,000 people starting with next to nothing, he had walked on the water, and he had calmed a fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee.

But even all these things were not enough.

They wanted a miracle on demand. Jesus was often baited in this manner, but he never complied with these kinds of arrogant requests. Instead, Jesus just pointed his challengers to what God had already provided for them.

He knew that those who would base their faith on the supernatural and miraculous would fall away when a needed miracle didn't arrive.

Certainly God works in spectacular ways on occasion today, but God wants us to trust him on the basis of who he is, not merely for what he can do for us in a pinch.

In their demand for a miracle, the people referred to the bread that God provided for their ancestors as they wandered in the wilderness.

They seemed to overlook the glaring fact that Moses' contemporaries were in the wilderness in the first place because of a profound lack of belief. And now they were displaying the exact same kind of spiritual disbelief.

Not one to pass up a teaching moment, Jesus took their obsessive concern about food, and expanded it into a profound metaphor about who he really was. In the wilderness, God gave the people "bread from heaven" -- and so Jesus calls himself the bread of heaven, hoping that they would get the point.

He said he was the only one who could sustain them eternally. But they grumbled at that idea.

Understanding the implications of what Jesus was saying, they began to question his credibility, much like the people of Jesus' hometown did when the Son of Man came to visit them.

"Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?" (John 6:42). In essence, they were saying, "We know this man's parents; he's really no different from us. Who does he think he is, telling us that he's from heaven?"

Jesus responds to their unbelief by pushing his point even further. He made it clear that no one could come to the Father unless God was drawing him or her in.

Perhaps exasperated with their unbelief, Jesus lays it on the line for them. There was no way that any of them could be reconciled with God apart from him. He was the bread of life. No bread -- no life.

Let's recall this truth as we sit down to eat this week -- whether we're dining alone, or with friends or family. The food we consume to give us strength and to keep us going is a picture of what Jesus will do for us eternally, if we only believe.

Bread can sustain the body, but only Jesus can satisfy the soul. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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