

Fourth Sunday of Lent

John 6:1-15

*A large crowd was following Him, Holy Scripture says, because they saw the signs He was performing on the sick. They followed Him because they had seen signs, and would like to see more signs. And in that regard, they were not disappointed. They did indeed see yet another sign, as we hear it, and they would even benefit from it themselves, and feed on it, and feast on it, and eat their fill. And when the people saw the sign that He had performed, they said, as we hear it: *This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!**

But had they seen the sign, really seen it? Had they seen it as a *sign*?

After this, our Lord Jesus withdrew from them, says Holy Scripture, as He perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king. And overnight He walked to the other side of the sea; although the sea is really a lake, but that is beside the point. In fact, He walked to the other side of the sea on the sea, at least part of the way, until He joined His disciples in their boat; but that, also, is beside the point. And in the morning the crowds saw that He was gone, and surmised that He had gone across the sea, and they sailed over, also, to the other side of the sea to see Him again. And our Lord Jesus said to them: *Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Labour not for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.*

For the sign they had seen, it was not about the bread with which He had fed them, there, by the sea, although on the other side of the sea, which is really a lake, but that, again, is beside the point; rather, the point is that the multitudes missed the point of the sign.

Our Lord Jesus is more than merely the Prophet like Moses, of whom Moses had spoken, whom God would send to the people, more than merely someone speaking the Word of God, and that is what a *Prophet* is. The word *prophet* comes from a Greek word which means to *bear forth*; for a prophet is someone who bears the Word of God to the people. Our Lord Jesus is more than that, though; He is the *Christ*, the Anointed Saviour God promised to send to His people with His salvation. This was what the signs He performed were meant to signify. They were not merely manifestations of His power, nor were they merely good deeds done to those in need, to help them through this life.

The signs He performed were the works of which God had spoken by the Prophets, which the Christ would do, once He came. They were signs of the salvation He would bring, that He would set sinners free, not only from the sufferings and sorrows of a world under the power of the evil one, but from the very power of the evil one itself, from sin and slavery to Satan, and from death, so that sinners would not have to join the evil one and his angels in the eternal fire prepared for them.

Therefore is it that the holy Apostle John points out, as we hear it, that *the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand*. With this reference, he points out that what our Lord Jesus did, there at the sea, which is really a lake, which is beside the point, it pointed to the Passover our Lord Jesus would later accomplish at Jerusalem, when once again He would take bread and give thanks and distribute it and say: *Take and eat; it is my body, which is given for you!*, that is: *given in your stead and on your behalf as an atoning sacrifice for your sins*. Yes, for that is how the words *for you* are used in the Old Testament, in reference to the sacrifices brought at the Temple, for atonement for the individual sins of individual sinners, and to the common offering brought for the collective sin of the people on the Day of Atonement.

And after that Passover meal, our Lord Jesus would go and give Himself over to death for the salvation of sinners, crucified and cursed and condemned by God for the sin of all sinners. As He would later have His holy Apostle Paul write it: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us; for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hanged upon a tree"*.

He would make Himself the fulfilment of the sign God had given to His people with the Passover; He would have Himself slaughtered as the real Passover Lamb. For this He had had Himself baptised with the Baptism of sinners to take upon Himself the sin of sinners to bear it for us, and His judgement against it; as the one who had baptised Him had also said of Him: *Behold, the Lamb of God who bears and takes away the sin of the world*.

In ancient days in Egypt, when God was about to make His judgement fall upon Egypt and have His wrath go through the land and bring death to all the firstborn, He had had each family of His people slaughter a lamb, and mark their doorposts with the blood of the lamb, and eat the lamb itself. And all the houses marked with the blood of the lamb the judgement of God would pass over and pass by; sufficient blood had already been shed there, according to the order and ordinance of God.

And those who ate of the Passover lamb, they were to be delivered from exile and slavery in Egypt to live with God in freedom instead, in the land He would give to His people. And ever since then, up until that last Passover in Jerusalem, the people of God would eat the Passover lamb; up until that last Passover, when the Firstborn and only-begotten Son of God would have Himself slaughtered as the final Passover Lamb, baptised into the sin of the world, and slaughtered for the sin of all sinners, as the one sacrifice sufficient to make up for the sin of the world, that sinners might not die for ever and perish in His wrath, but rather live and be with Him for ever in the fullness of His goodness and His glory.

To this the Passover had pointed forward all through the years, and the sacrifices offered in the Temple; and to this it pointed forward, the sign the Son of God performed there, by the sea, which is actually a lake: the final Passover, the Son of God giving His body over as a sacrifice for the sin of sinners, for their salvation, and feeding sinners with Himself.

The sign He performed there, by the sea, when He multiplied little to make it to feed the many, it was also the fulfilment of what was written of the Christ by the Prophet Isaiah: *He shall feed His flock like a shepherd.* And it also points to what our Lord Jesus would later say: *I am the Good Shepherd. The good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.* And these words, again, point to this, that our Lord Jesus is so much more than a Prophet, that for our salvation God Himself would give *Himself* over to suffering and death for our sin. For these words point, also, to what the Psalm says: *The Lord is my Shepherd!*

The Anointed one whom God would send for the salvation of His people is none other than the Son of God, Himself God from eternity. And He would save His people not only from outward enemies, but from the enemy within, from sin itself, from slavery to Satan, and from all sufferings and sorrows of a world under the power of the evil one, and from the fate that follows from having joined the evil one in his rebellion against God, from having to join him and his angels in the eternal fire prepared for them, so as to be delivered, instead, to live with God for ever in His Kingdom, in the land He will give to His people, where He will dwell with them and wipe away every tear from their eyes. *And death shall be no more, as the holy Apostle John heard the voice declare it from Heaven, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.*

To this glorious reality the sign pointed, which He performed there, by the sea, which is really a lake, which is beside the point. For this is the point: that the multitudes missed the point of the sign; they sought Him, not because they had seen the sign, but rather because they had eaten their fill of the loaves, and they wanted to be able to do so for the rest of their lives; as they had missed the point to begin with, when they followed Him because they had seen the signs He performed on the sick, and wanted to see more signs; as we miss the point if what we seek from Him is worldly wealth and health and happiness, as false teachers will teach us to seek through Him, or entertainment or excitement or emotional fulfilment. *Labour not for the food that perishes, as He said it, and still says it, by having had His Word recorded in Holy Scripture, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.*

He feeds His flock with Himself. He has given Himself as a sacrifice for the salvation of sinners. And He feeds His flock with His own life and Spirit, by means of His Word of life, of His love and what His love has done for us. For in His Word of life is His very own life, which makes sinners to come alive from the death of disobedience and defiance to live with Him instead, in His love.

And His flock are all who hear His Word of salvation, and take it to heart. As He has also said it: *All that the Father gives to me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from Heaven, not to do my own will but rather His will, who sent me. And this is His will, who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all He has given to me, but rather raise it up on the last day. And this is my Father's will, who sent me, that whoever looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.*

And He feeds His Church with His own life as He gives His body and blood to us, in His festive meal of salvation, and makes us one with Him, so that all that is His is our also, and all that He is. As He has also said it: *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.*

And so He calls us, today, to hear His Word and take it to heart, His promise of salvation and eternal life given to us, on account of what He Himself has done for us, out of His goodness and mercy and for no other reason whatsoever. And He calls us to receive Him and His salvation, as He gives Himself to us, in His festive meal of salvation.

O Christ our God, Lamb of God, who have borne, and take away, the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. Amen.