

16. April 2021

“Understanding signs properly”

*Jn 6:1-15*

*After this, Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee - or of Tiberias- and a large crowd followed him, impressed by the signs he had done in curing the sick. Jesus climbed the hillside and sat down there with his disciples. The time of the Jewish Passover was near. Looking up, Jesus saw the crowds approaching and said to Philip, 'Where can we buy some bread for these people to eat?' He said this only to put Philip to the test; he himself knew exactly what he was going to do. Philip answered, 'Two hundred denarii would not buy enough to give them a little piece each.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said, 'Here is a small boy with five barley loaves and two fish; but what is that among so many?' Jesus said to them, 'Make the people sit down.' There was plenty of grass there, and as many as five thousand men sat down. Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were sitting there; he then did the same with the fish, distributing as much as they wanted. When they had eaten enough he said to the disciples, 'Pick up the pieces left over, so that nothing is wasted.' So they picked them up and filled twelve large baskets with scraps left over from the meal of five barley loaves. Seeing the sign that he had done, the people said, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.' Jesus, as he realised they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, fled back to the hills alone.*

The sign that the Lord works in today's text is one thing, the other is how people understand it and what they make out of it.

One is the miraculous multiplication of bread and fish, with which the Lord shows both his divine authority and his care for people. This was preceded by the healings of the sick.

This turning of God towards his people, which he confirmed with these signs, made them at first correctly recognise that he was the prophet who was to come into the world. However, they had not yet come to the realisation that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, and so, as we can learn from Jesus' words, they drew the wrong conclusion.

The Lord knew this. They would want to make him an earthly king; an earthly king who would do miracles and feed the people. With such a one, the troubles would be over and a kind of earthly paradise could come into being.

What a mistake! The actual message of the Lord, to save man from his lostness and to redeem him, would take a back seat in favour of earthly ideas of happiness. A great danger! Let us think of the temptation of Jesus by the devil in the wilderness. All the kingdoms of the world Satan wanted to give to Christ if he would fall at his feet and do him homage (*cf. Mt 4:8-9*).

Here in the text the temptation is even more subtle. It is not Satan directly who would make Jesus the ruler of this world, but the people. But here too Satan would have his hidden purposes. A king who does not care about the salvation of souls and snatches them from the power of evil is no longer dangerous for him. He would - in the course of time - get him under his control, because the actual mission of Jesus would not be fulfilled and would be perverted.

However, that which God allows His Messiah to work as a sign of His love and that which is added to His message of salvation must not come first.

We could even perceive here something like a model for the reign of an Antichrist. He will be like a king, will do miracles and satisfy the people. He would allow himself to be made king and is likely to have already succumbed to Satan's temptation to earthly power beforehand.

Jesus eludes the people and flees back to the hills to be alone with his Father.

Great vigilance is needed to ensure that the Church does not succumb to such a temptation. Improving the living conditions of this world and serving the poor is not the first mission of the Church and must not become dominant. Her first mission is the proclamation of the Gospel and the service of the salvation of souls (*cf. Acts 6:2-4*). In this primary context, the other ministries that grow out of the Gospel message come along and witness to the presence of God's love in this world.

Let us look closely and understand what Jesus is doing: when he sees that his very message would suffer distortion, he withdraws.

Let us not allow the Lord's message to undergo a distortion! Let us remain in the primary mission! Everything else will be added (*Mt 6:33*)!