

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

John 5:1 - 6:71

Scene 3: The Messianic Banquet (6:1-15)



1. Jesus gathers disciples : [from the tradition 1](#)
: Community (Church) essential to Jesus' mission
2. **Cana** : The new covenant marriage feast / Bridegroom
3. Clearing of the Temple : [from the tradition 2](#)
: Meeting with Nicodemus opens into reflection on the Spirit and judgment (salvation not condemnation).
Invitation to come to the light
4. John the Baptist : reinforces seeing Jesus as Bridegroom
[from the tradition 3](#)
5. **Samaria** : Mission goes beyond Judaism ('Saviour of the world').
: Meeting with woman opens into reflection on thirst
: reinforces place of the Spirit ('worship in Spirit and truth')
6. Royal Official's son : [from the tradition 4](#)
: different memory + different interpretive commentary

Jesus reveals God as God of Love (Gift of Self)

1. Scene at the Pool of Beth-zatha opens into a reflection on Jesus.

Everything Jesus says and everything he does flows from his communion with God. In his humanity, Jesus is the perfect human embodiment of the divine nature, revealed as Love.

The reflection picks up the conflict that Jesus experienced because of the resistance of the Jewish leadership to his mission. It also picks up the on-going debates between Jesus' disciples and the Jews.

2. Jesus gives himself to satisfy our hunger : [from the tradition 5](#).

The following is Mark's account (6:30-44), followed by Luke and Matthew.

Mark 6:30-38

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught ... They went away in the boat to a deserted place ... As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But Jesus answered them, "You give them something to eat yourselves." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred day's wages worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish."

Mark 6:39-44

Jesus ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. All ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

John 6:1-2

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd were following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.

We already know that Jesus is calling people to a deeper faith (see 2:23-25; 4:48).

John 6:3

Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.

We are to think of Mount Sinai and the words of the Prologue: 'The law indeed was given through Moses; the gift of truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17).

John 6:4

Now the Passover (see 2:13), the festival of the Jews, was near.

Jesus 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 (John 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.

John 6:5

When Jesus looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him

They are ‘**coming toward Jesus**’ – the first step to becoming disciples (1:39,46; 4:29). In John’s account it is Jesus, not the disciples, 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).

John 6:5-9

Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?”

The dialogue between Jesus and Philip and Andrew 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 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).

John 6:10-13

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. Then he 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**. When they were satisfied, he told his **disciples**, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the **five barley loaves**, left by those who had eaten, they filled **twelve baskets**.

Jesus’ action, as will be made explicit later in John’s interpretive commentary, recalls God’s gift of manna from heaven to the hungry people journeying through the wilderness (Exodus 16 and Numbers 11).

This is the first time John has referred to ‘twelve’. He will speak of ‘the twelve again in verses 67, 70 and 71 (see also 20:24). What Jesus has done here his disciples are to do so that ‘**nothing (no one) may be lost**.’

John 6:14-15

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.” 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 showing them that when we place our lives in his hands and when we ‘give thanks’ (εὐχαριστέω) 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. Jesus 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.

Scene 4: Jesus is with his disciples (6:16-21)

John 6:15-18

Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.



John is drawing here on the tradition. After his dramatic presentation of Jesus nourishing the people in the wilderness, Mark (followed by Matthew) adds: ‘Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray. When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea.

He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

John 6:19-21

When they had rowed about twenty-five or thirty stadia, (c. 5 kilometres) they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified.



But he said to them, “It is I [ἐγώ εἰμι]; do not be afraid.” Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

ἐγώ εἰμι

Isaiah 43:2

‘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;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.’

Isaiah 51:10

‘Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep;
who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over?’

Psalms 77:16,19

Your way, O God, was through the sea, your path, through the mighty
waters.

ἐγώ εἰμι

Exodus 3:13-14

Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses,

אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה

“I AM WHO I AM.”

Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν

“I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.”

To Isaac: ‘I will be with you, and will bless you’(Genesis 26:3).

To Jacob: ‘I will be with you’ (Genesis 31:3).

To Joshua: ‘I will be with you’ (Deuteronomy 31:23).

To Gideon: ‘I will be with you’ (Judges 6:16).

'In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19)

'They will name him Immanuel, which means, "God is **with us**."

(Matthew 1:23).

'I am **with you** always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20).

'I will be **with you** a little while longer,
and then I am going to him who sent me' (John 7:33).

'It was not I, but the grace of God that is **with me**' (1 Corinthians 15:10).

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 with us, caring for the community. We will be safe and we will reach our goal if we do not lose faith in him.

Scene 5: Jesus and the Passover (6:22-71)

John 6:22-25

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. Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord (first time) had **given thanks** (εὐχαριστεῖν). So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capharnaum **seeking Jesus**. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?”



Ettore Masina, Jesus of Nazareth, Libreria Borgo, Rome, 1977.

John 6:26-27

Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 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.”

It is important to note that this gift is given by ‘the Son of Man’. 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.

John 6:28-30

Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” 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?”

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 1 John 3:23). As Saint Paul wrote to the Galatians: ‘The only thing that counts is faith working through love’ (Galatians 5:6).

John 6:31-34

Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’ (Psalm 77:24). 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 the true (ἀληθινός) bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

They are looking for a sign such as their ancestors experienced in their journey through the wilderness when they had manna to eat. Jesus reminds them that it was not Moses who gave them the manna, it was God. They must look to see what God, the Father, is giving them now. It is his Son, Jesus, and the gift is not just ‘for them’. It is for the world.

John 6:35

Jesus said to them, “I am (ἐγώ εἰμι) the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (compare 4:13-14).

We have already observed Jesus’ use of the expression ‘I am’ (ἐγώ εἰμι) 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, ‘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’.

‘I am the bread of life’ 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).

John 6:36-40

But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. 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**. 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**.”

Two notable ‘days of the Lord’ were the 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, 2Chronicles36:22-23).

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).

John 6:41-47

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” 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?’” Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. 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.

It is written in the prophets (Jeremiah 31:34; Isaiah 54:13) ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.

John 6:48-51

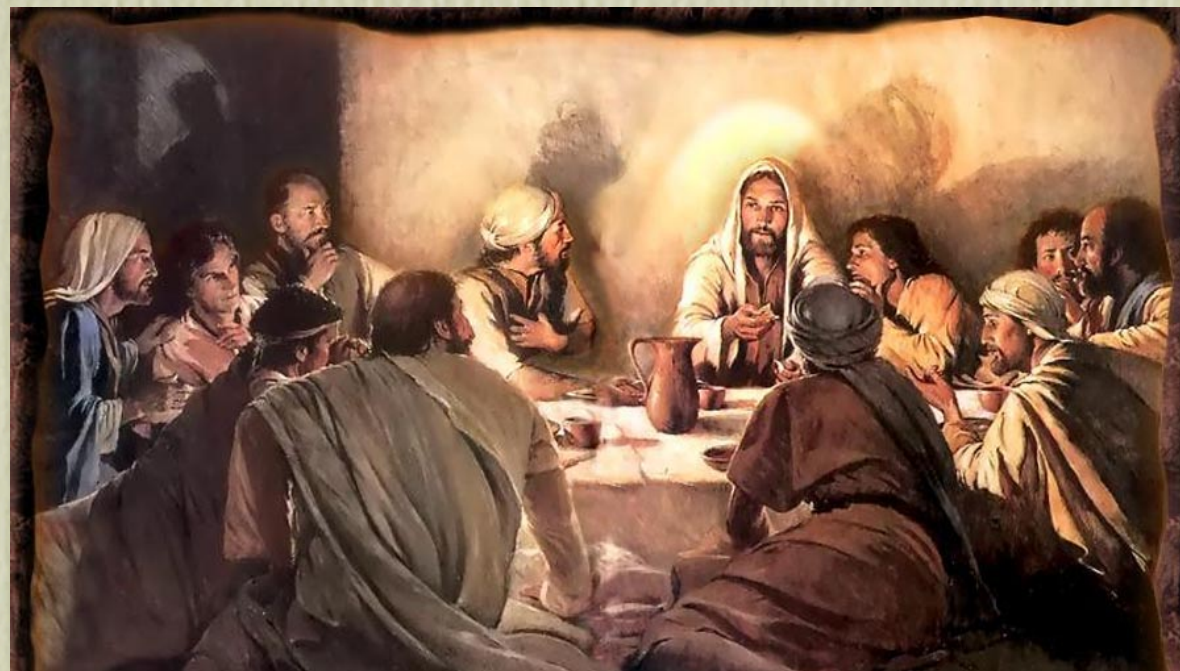
I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Jesus 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). 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).

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 shared 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 even when it causes us pain.

John 6:52-54

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So 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. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up **on the last day**.”



Source unknown

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.

John 6:55-59

My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 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.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capharnaum.

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’ (1 Corinthians 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). Jesus is sharing with us the intimate life-union 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 at the Baptism. God did this all during Jesus’ life and continued to do it, as we shall see, when Jesus was on the cross.

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).

John 6:60-64

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the **Son of Man** ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 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.

It appears that these disciples balked at the idea of Jesus giving his flesh for the life of the world (6:51). 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.

John 6:65-67

“For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?”

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’. Jesus turns to them.

John 6:68-71

Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil (διάβολός). He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

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.

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