

King for a Day

communion meditation

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John 6:1-15

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You may remember the radio and TV show "Queen for a Day" that made the radio scene in 1947 and continued on daytime television until 1964. A prelude to today's reality television, the format was simple. Host Jack Bailey interviewed candidates to determine who best deserved to be crowned Queen for a Day. Candidates were selected for their sad stories. An "applause meter" measured audience support/sympathy for each candidate in decibels, and the winner of the loudest most sustained applause was draped in red velvet, topped with a sparkling crown, and festooned with a bouquet of roses. The grand finale was a parade of gifts, including a big vacation trip, which the "Queen" could enjoy before returning to her miserable life. Except for Jack Bailey's trademark sign-off, "Make every woman a queen for every single day," no relief was promised beyond the glitz and glitter of the day and permission for the ordinary miserable housewife to daydream for a half-hour about an expense-paid vacation and a house full of new appliances.

The feeding the multitude is central in the ministry of Jesus, the only miracle of Jesus recorded in all four Gospels. Matthew and Mark tell the story twice with different numbers, so it actually appears six times in the Gospels. Only John interprets Jesus' escape to a mountain as a response to the popular move to "take him by force to make him king." When the determined crowd caught up with Jesus on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus impugned their motive: "you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." (v. 26) The Roman orator Cicero declared that a successful emperor provides bread and circuses for the people, food for the stomach and relief to their boredom. Jesus refused to cheapen the reign of God to the whimsical applause of the crowd. He would not be king for a day or the provider of a free lunch.

The appetite for power identified with monarchy distorts messianic reign. Kings are everywhere in the Bible—good and evil, strong and weak, temporal and eternal. Although David is the ideal king of Israel and model for the messianic reign, the role of king is greeted with ambivalence in the Old Testament. The people demanded a king like other nations, but they learned through hard experience that power corrupts. That Jesus would be associated with the mixed bag of Jewish kingdom is somewhat confusing and misleading, but the Gospels maintain a wall of distinction between the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus and the popular notion of messiah.

The "Magnificat" of Mary anticipates that Jesus would inherit the kingdom of David and rule over the house of Jacob in a kingdom without end (Lk. 1:32-33). Following his birth, wise men from the East come seeking the one "born king of the Jews" (Mt. 2:2), and even in infancy Jesus is a threat to King Herod. At the Temptation, Jesus is offered the kingdoms of this world. The entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday had royal overtones reflecting the messianic prophecy, but he rode a donkey rather than a white stallion, and his entrance turned out to be the final moment of glory before his execution. The regal ambitions of Jesus play a major role in his death. At his trial, Pilate asked, "Are you the King of the Jews?" (Jn 18:33). Although Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world" (36), Pilate's word to the people was, "Here is your King!" (19:14), and Jesus was crucified under the accusation posted on his cross, "King of the Jews."

From birth to death, Jesus was identified as king, but he never takes up the scepter or the sword or has the slightest interest in claiming the throne of Caesar. Jesus was a constant threat to authority both secular and religious, yet he never had the slightest interest in raising armies or taxes or gratifying his own ego. The stark contrast of messianic expectation and the accepted servant role of Jesus seems clear enough in the Gospels, but it does not seem to get through to the Church of later centuries. Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* envisioned a return of Jesus during the Spanish Inquisition. The Grand Inquisitor readily dismisses Jesus as Lord of the Church; he was far too humble to rule the ecclesiastical empire: "Hadst Thou taken the world and Caesar's purple, Thou wouldst have founded the universal state and have given universal peace. For who can rule men if not he who holds their conscience and their bread in his hands?"

The reign of God transcends all kingdoms. John Dominic Crossan objects to translating the message of Jesus as "kingdom of God." The suffix *dom* implies a territorial empire on a par with Greece or Rome. The reign of God cannot be compared to the kingdoms of this world.

The Gospel of John has been called the book of signs. The miracles are always more than spectacular events to dazzle the crowd; they are signs pointing to the way of God. The prayer of blessing and the breaking the bread are subtle reflections on the Passover that Jesus celebrated with his disciples on the night before his death. Like most of the miracles, the feeding of the multitude is a living demonstration of the authority of God in Christ, evidence that the reign of God was present. Even the gathering of the people into groups and the gathered leftovers imply organizational principles of government. The four Gospels present distinct interpretations of the miracle. Luke simply tells the story. Matthew and Mark focus on the compassion of Jesus for the people. The people are hungry and need to be fed; but, in Mark, the people are also lost, "as sheep without a shepherd." They need to be led. Perhaps they need a king.

John focuses on the symbolic meaning of bread, Jesus the bread of life. Typical of John, the story runs on two levels, the material and the spiritual. Casual observers never quite get the message. Nicodemus is puzzled by the meaning of rebirth and the Samaritan woman by living water. John observes that we are like children assuming that reality is limited to our senses. We are prone to look only at the surface of things, while the truth is always more than what we can see and bigger than we can grasp.

The multitude is concerned about the bread which fills the stomach. Jesus is concerned about the bread that endures to eternal life—soul food. The people are looking for the short answer, the immediate need. Can you see the difference? We have encountered the problem of human myopia in dealing with world hunger. At first, we only saw the immediate problem before us of starving people in Third World countries; we rushed to provide them with emergency rations. In the process we learned that people need more than a meal. They need to be able to produce food for a lifetime. Jesus took this simple principle of world hunger to the next step. The Lord of all creation is not impressed with our game of "King for a Day."