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# Session 3 - The Prophet

## Bible Passages:

- John 6:1-33

## Brief Notes:

John is relatively sparing in the signs he chooses to include so it is surprising to have two together as we have here. The repeated mention of “signs” in the passage suggests that a key theme in these verses is the significance of the signs Jesus performs. The other key theme is the Old Testament background. Though the events recorded here happened “some time after” chapter 5 (see verse 1), as John writes it follows straight on from 5:45-47 with the repeated references to Moses’ testimony to Jesus. There are lots of Exodus references here: notice the reference to the Passover in verse 4, the miraculous feeding of the 5000 has echoes of the miraculous feeding in the Wilderness (which is made explicit in vv.31-33), and the crowds identifying Jesus as the promised Prophet like Moses. Jesus’ walking on the water perhaps has echoes of the Red Sea too. That Old Testament background points to who Jesus is, though the crowd fail to see the true significance of the miracle and draw the proper conclusion. As well as showing the crowd’s blindness, we also see Jesus testing and strengthening the faith of the disciples through these signs.

## 1-15 : The feeding of the 5000

This is of course a very well-known story, but notice what is distinctive in the way John tells it. Verse two flags up the issue of the crowd’s response to the signs: they are attracted by them,

though Jesus will later (v.26) make clear that their interest is really only in the sign, not what the sign signifies. In the other gospels it is the disciples who raise the matter of food for this vast crowd, but John mentions Jesus' intention to test the disciples' faith. Both Philip and Andrew see an impossible situation, but Jesus miraculously feeds this vast crowd so that each has "as much as they wanted", with plenty left over.

The crowd clearly recognised echoes of the Exodus and reckon Jesus must be the Prophet Moses had spoken of (see Deuteronomy 18:15-19), one like Moses. According to Deuteronomy their response should therefore have been to listen to him, but they are more concerned to make Jesus fit in with their agenda - they want political deliverance, not from Egypt now but Rome, and want to force him into that role. Their thinking throughout is essentially materialistic.

## **16-24 : Jesus walking on the water**

This sign is witnessed only by the disciples; the crowds are left confused as to how and when Jesus left but don't see what the disciples saw - a reminder that as well as pointing the unbeliever to truths about Christ, the signs have lessons for disciples, aiming to test and strengthen their faith. Lessons could be drawn from the previous miracle about trusting Jesus with the little we have, resources that seem woefully inadequate, and looking to him to use what we have to meet the needs around us. This miracle too has lessons for disciples. "It is I" could be translated simply as "I am", with echoes of the burning bush, and given that he was walking on water at the time, I think we should hear in it not simply Jesus saying "It's ok. It's just me", but "See who I am!" He is the God of the exodus. Turbulent waters often speak of the forces of evil and chaos, and we might see in this story a picture of the church in the world. We too can take comfort from knowing Jesus is with us.

## **25-33 : The truth that the sign signified**

The crowd were clearly keen to be with Jesus, but Jesus exposes their true motivation. His point in verse 26 is not that they were uninterested in the signs, but that they never saw beyond the sign to what they sign pointed to. They simply wanted their bellies filled (or to see the sick healed, v.2), their concern is only with this world and their physical needs, but the miraculous feeding was meant to point to a more profound truth: that Jesus was the one who could provide food that brings ultimate and eternal satisfaction. He tells them in v.27 that that food is what they should be concerned to have. When they ask how they can get such food, he has already told them that he is the one who can supply it, so he says all they must do is believe in him (v.29). Their request for a sign that might prove his credentials seems odd in the light of the earlier miracle, but presumably they wanted not just bread and fish but something akin to manna, a heavenly kind of food that indeed doesn't spoil but "endures to eternal life". They were seeing Jesus as simply a new Moses, but Jesus wants them to see he is much more than just that, so in verses 32,33 he corrects their misunderstanding. He speaks of the giver and the gift. The manna, he reminds them, was not

Moses' gift but God's, which lifts the frame of reference to a different level. And this bread they want some evidence of is Jesus himself – there in front of them.

## Discussion Questions:

A possible opening question to get people thinking about the passage might be to ask –

- What words come to mind to describe Jesus / the crowds / the disciples in this passage?

Instead of just working through the passage straight, you could look through first with respect Jesus and the crowds, then Jesus and the disciples.

### *Jesus and the crowds*

- What evidence is there in the passage of the crowd's interest in the signs Jesus performed?
- What conclusion did they draw from the sign of the miraculous feeding?
- Why do you think they made that link?
- Why does v.15 suggest their understanding was nevertheless inadequate?
- How do they understand their needs?
- In verse 26 Jesus implies their apparent interest in his signs was essentially flawed. How so?
- What deeper need does Jesus want them to recognise?
- How is this deeper need to be met?
- What in our own lives might be "food that spoils" that we are tempted to live for?
- How might we or others follow Jesus not so much for eternal life but simply for "food that spoils"?
- Why do you think they ask for a further sign to prove his credentials (vv.30,31)?
- Why wasn't the provision of bread and fish sufficient?
- How does Jesus correct their misunderstanding in vv.32,33?
- In your own words, what is Jesus wanting the crowds (and us) to see and do?

### *Jesus and the disciples*

- The disciples do "believe in the one he has sent", but their faith needs strengthening. What does v.6 suggest was one purpose of the first miracle? How does it test and strengthen their (and our) faith?
- The second miracle was just for the disciples' benefit. How does this build their (and our) faith?

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