

**Reflection on the Gospel-18th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(John 6:24-35)**

-Veronica M. Lawson RSM

The question of the crowds "Rabbi, *when* did you come *here*?" has to do with time and place. They address Jesus as teacher, as one who can lead his questioners from one physical and metaphorical place to another. His response to their question introduces a discussion about bread. This opens up for readers through the ages a whole world of earth activity, of sun and soil and seed and plant, a world of planting and harvesting, of processing and cooking.

We have become so familiar with many of the sayings of Jesus that we can easily fail to notice the earth elements or the constructed environment in the text and treat them simply as backdrop for human activity rather than as having value in themselves. Jesus' claim "I am the bread of life" invites us to consider bread as matter essential to life as well as a metaphor for God's incarnate Word. It invites us to consider what both material and symbolic dimensions of the statement might mean for living a gospel way of life.

We might note the close attention in this passage to the material and social context of Jesus' words. Boats, a town (Capernaum), the sea (of Galilee), the land on the "other side" all feature in this text. For those who have visited Galilee and seen the first century boat preserved in Kibbutz Ginnosar, reference to boats might evoke the diversity of wooden materials used in boat construction, in this case mostly oak and cedar. It might also alert us to the human communities that interacted with the material world to build the boats so integral to the life of the lake communities.

Those who have seen images of Capernaum will be aware of the basalt building materials used in the construction of the houses and might be led to wonder at the extraordinary processes of rock formation. The Sea of Galilee has agency in so many gospel stories. Here it is mentioned in passing, but must not be ignored, especially as we become aware of how perilously endangered it has become since its waters have been exploited for irrigation over several decades. The "other side" evokes the rich agricultural land generally referred to as the "bread-basket" of the region. Mention of the crowd introduces children as well as women and men searching for Jesus. In other words, the text invites us into the whole Galilean world encoded in the text.

Ironically, the words of the Johannine Jesus with their focus on the symbolic meaning of the bread turn his questioners away from the physical, material Earth elements that constitute both bread and flesh. Pope Francis invites us again and again to value and respect the material world. In these troubled times of pandemic, those hungering for life sustaining bread can rightly expect to find their hunger satisfied by the disciples of the one who claims to be the "bread of life".