

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

-Veronica M. Lawson RSM

We have become so familiar with the sayings of Jesus that we can easily fail to notice the earth elements in the text or the constructed environment 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.

The question, "Rabbi, *when* did you come *here*?", has to do with time and place. Jesus is addressed as teacher, as one who can lead his questioners from one physical and metaphorical place to another. It is his response to this question that introduces the discussion about bread. This in turn opens up a whole world of earth activity, of sun and soil and seed and plant, a world of planting and harvesting, of processing and cooking. 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. The more we do so, the more attuned we will be to the implications of accepting that Jesus is the bread of life.