

Session 6

The Shepherd and the Bread

Mark 6 | A Ransom for Many: A Catholic Journey Through the Gospel of Mark

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: Participants discover the chapter of two banquets: Herod's birthday feast, which ends with a prophet's head on a platter, and the Shepherd's feast on green grass, where five loaves feed five thousand. Between them they will watch the Twelve sent out with authority, anointing the sick with oil, and they will see Jesus walk on the sea speaking words that belong to the burning bush.

Catholic Touchstone: The Eucharist prefigured. The feeding miracles, says the Catechism, prefigure the superabundance of the unique bread of Christ's Eucharist (CCC 1335), and the verbs of Mark 6:41, took, blessed, broke, gave, are the verbs of the Last Supper. This is also the chapter the Church cites for the verse the Church hears as alluding to the Anointing of the Sick (Mark 6:13; CCC 1511).

What You Need to Know

The chapter opens with rejection at Nazareth (6:1-6). "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" Familiarity has bred contempt: they think knowing his trade and his family means knowing him. Two notes for careful readers. Calling a man "son of Mary" rather than by his father's name is unusual; Mark leaves it uninterpreted, and so should we, beyond noticing the coldness. And 6:5, "he could do no mighty work there," must be handled honestly: this is not a battery running low. Mark himself adds "except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them," and the "could not" is commonly understood as the grammar of covenant: miracles in the Gospels are not stunts performed AT people but encounters that ordinarily seek an open door. Where unbelief bolts the door, the Lord who respects freedom will not blast it. He "marveled because of their unbelief," one of only two things Jesus marvels at in the Gospels; the other is a Gentile's faith.

Then the sending (6:7-13): two by two, with authority over unclean spirits, traveling almost absurdly light, no bread, no bag, no money. The poverty is the sermon: heralds who carry nothing demonstrate that the kingdom, not the kit, sustains them. Verse 13 deserves a full stop: "they anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them." The Catechism, following Trent, teaches that this sacrament was instituted by Christ our Lord, is alluded to by Mark in this verse, and is recommended to the faithful and promulgated by James 5:14-15, where the presbyters of the Church anoint and pray (CCC 1511). When your grandmother received Anointing before surgery, she stood in a line that begins in Mark 6.

Mark then does his sandwich move at chapter scale: between the apostles' sending and their return he inserts the death of John the Baptist (6:14-29), the only extended story in Mark not about Jesus. The placement is the meaning: this is what can happen to those who are sent. And the scene is staged as a banquet, Herod's birthday feast, with courtiers, oaths, a dance, and a girl carrying a prophet's head on a dish, set against the feast Jesus is about to host on the grass. Two kingdoms, two banquets: at one table power devours the just; at the other the Shepherd feeds the hungry. Note Herod's tragedy carefully: he feared John, "knew that he was a righteous and holy man," heard him gladly, and was "much perplexed," and then murdered him anyway, rather than lose face before dinner guests. Respect for holiness without obedience to it curdles into complicity. The forerunner has now gone before the Lord in death as in birth.

The feeding of the five thousand (6:30-44) is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels, and Mark saturates it with Scripture. The setting: Jesus sees the crowd "as sheep without a shepherd," Moses' phrase when begging God for a successor (Numbers 27:17), and Ezekiel's indictment of Israel's failed shepherds, which ends with God promising "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep" (Ezekiel 34:15). Then Mark, alone among the evangelists, mentions that the grass was GREEN, and makes the Shepherd's guests "lie down" on it: Psalm 23 is being staged before our eyes, and readers have long heard it here: the LORD is my shepherd, he makes me lie down in green pastures, he prepares a table. The organization "by hundreds and by fifties" echoes Moses' ordering of Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 18:21). The closest prophetic precedent is Elisha feeding a hundred men with twenty loaves (2 Kings 4:42-44), let the group find it and feel how far Jesus exceeds it. And then the four verbs: "taking the five loaves... he blessed, and broke the loaves, and gave them", the exact liturgical sequence of the Last Supper (14:22) and of every Mass since. Twelve baskets of fragments remain, a number long read as one per tribe: Israel's Shepherd feeds Israel with bread to spare.

The walking on the sea (6:45-52) is not a rescue story with special effects; it is a theophany. Mark says the strangest thing: "He meant to pass by them." In Scripture, "passing by" is technical vocabulary: God makes his glory PASS BY Moses in the cleft of the rock (Exodus 33:19-22), and the LORD PASSES BY Elijah at Horeb (1 Kings 19:11). Job says God "alone stretched out the heavens, and trampled the waves of the sea... he passes by me, and I see him not" (Job 9:8, 11). Jesus treading the waves and meaning to pass by evokes, for readers steeped in the Torah, what Moses and Elijah were shown. And his word to them, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear," carries in Greek, for many readers, the undertone of the divine name: *ego eimi*, I AM (Exodus 3:14). Then Mark's stunning diagnosis of their terror: "they did not understand ABOUT THE LOAVES, but their hearts were hardened." Understand the loaves rightly, Mark implies, and you understand who walks the sea. The bread is an identity revelation, and it has only begun.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- **Numbers 27:16-17 and Ezekiel 34:5, 15, 23.** "Sheep without a shepherd" is Moses' prayer for a successor and Ezekiel's indictment of Israel's leaders, resolved by God's double promise: "I myself will be the shepherd," and "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David." On the green grass both promises stand in one person.
- **Psalm 23.** Green pastures, reclining flocks, a prepared table, goodness and mercy: Mark's uniquely green grass tells us which psalm is being staged.
- **2 Kings 4:42-44.** Elisha feeds a hundred men with twenty barley loaves, over his servant's protest, "and had some left." The template scene, exceeded by orders of magnitude: five loaves, five thousand men, twelve baskets over.
- **Exodus 16 (manna), Exodus 18:21 (hundreds and fifties), Exodus 33:19-22, 1 Kings 19:11, Job 9:8, Exodus 3:14.** The wilderness feeding, the Mosaic ordering of the people, and the "passing by" and I AM of the sea-walking: the whole Exodus is being recapitulated around Jesus, bread in the wilderness and the divine Name at the sea.

Voices of the Church

Voices of the Church: St. Augustine (Tractates on the Gospel of John, on the feeding of the five thousand)

St. Augustine teaches that the multiplication of the loaves is not a violation of nature but its unveiling: the same God who every year multiplies a few grains sown in the earth into whole harvests did in his hands, swiftly and visibly, what he does in creation slowly and unseen. The miracle is a word as well as a work: it was done so that we would ask what it means, and seek the

Bread that does not perish.

Voices of the Church: St. Ambrose of Milan (On the Duties of the Clergy, on Herod's oath)

St. Ambrose holds up Herod's banquet as the proof that a wicked promise must be broken, not kept: it is sometimes contrary to duty to fulfill an oath, and Herod's keeping of his rash vow, beheading a prophet to avoid embarrassing himself before dinner guests, made the oath the lesser sin and the keeping of it the greater. No one is bound by a promise to do evil; the shame Herod feared was innocence compared to the shame he chose.

Voices of the Church: St. Bede the Venerable (Commentary on Mark, on the compassion of the Shepherd)

St. Bede sees the whole Gospel in the sequence of 6:34: the Lord sees the crowd, is moved with compassion, and responds first by TEACHING them many things, and only afterward by feeding them. So Christ still deals with his flock, Bede says: the sheep without a shepherd are gathered first by the word and then nourished at the table, doctrine and bread; the Church has long spoken, in the same spirit, of the two tables of Word and Sacrament from which she feeds her children.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1335:** The miracles of the multiplication of loaves, in which the Lord blessed, broke, and distributed the loaves through his disciples, prefigure the superabundance of the unique bread of his Eucharist.
- **CCC 1511:** The Church believes and confesses that among the seven sacraments there is one especially intended to strengthen those who are being tried by illness, the Anointing of the Sick; it was instituted by Christ our Lord, is alluded to by Mark (6:13), and is recommended to the faithful and promulgated by James (5:14-15).
- **CCC 548-549:** Jesus' miracles are signs that attest he is the Son of God, invitations to believe, not attempts to satisfy curiosity or magic-hunger; some people are scandalized by them anyway.
- **CCC 1506-1509:** Christ invites his disciples to share his ministry of compassion and healing; the Church continues it in her sacraments and care of the sick.

Thread Watch

Thread Watch (leader only)

The Bread: OFFICIALLY PLANTED, at last. The four verbs (took, blessed, broke, gave), the twelve baskets, and above all Mark's editorial key at 6:52: "they did not understand about the loaves." From here forward, bread is never just bread in this Gospel. Do NOT connect it to the Last Supper for the group yet; let the verbs do their slow work. Recall privately how the David-and-showbread scene (2:25-26) now glows in retrospect.

The Messianic Secret: Deepening in a new key: the theophany on the sea (*ego eimi*, the passing by) is shown to the Twelve alone, and even they do not understand. The Secret is no longer only

Jesus silencing others; it is hardened hearts failing to read what is shown.

The Way: Background hum: the Twelve are sent out on the road with nothing, the lifestyle of the Way before the word becomes a theme.

Torn: Dormant. Sealed-guess watch: still no human confession.

Session Goals

1. Participants can explain 6:5 ("could do no mighty work") without embarrassment: the covenant grammar of miracles and faith.
2. Participants can identify Mark 6:13 and James 5:14-15 as the biblical roots of the Anointing of the Sick.
3. Participants can read the two-banquets contrast and articulate Herod's tragedy of admiration without obedience.
4. Participants discover the shepherd texts, Psalm 23's green grass, and the Elisha template, and can recite the four Eucharistic verbs.
5. Participants can explain "he meant to pass by them" and ego eimi as language widely read as theophany, and answer the naturalistic "sharing miracle" theory.

Time Note (90 Minutes)

Win 15 min | Build 55 min | Send 15 min | Closing prayer 5 min. **Pre-chosen cuts if running long:** compress question 2 (the sending) into a leader summary keeping only the 6:13 anointing point, and shorten the Herod discussion to the two-banquets contrast. Do not cut the feeding sequence, the sea-walking, or the steelman.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord Jesus, Good Shepherd, you see crowds where others see interruptions, and you feed where others calculate. Gather us tonight on the green grass of your word, teach us many things, and give us bread we did not earn. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Has anyone ever underestimated you because they knew you "back when"? What is it like to be reduced to your resume or your family?
2. Describe the best meal you have ever been served, not the best food, the best MEAL. What made it that?

Leader bridge: Tonight, one chapter, two banquets. At one of them, a king serves death on a platter. At the other, a Shepherd seats five thousand on green grass. Watch which kingdom you would rather eat in, and count the verbs at the second table.

Build (55 minutes)

Read Mark 6:1-13 aloud.

1. **Nazareth (6:1-6): "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?... And they took offense at him." Then the verse skeptics love: "he COULD do no mighty work there." Is Jesus' power failing? Read verses 5-6 carefully and untangle it.**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Read the whole sentence: "he could do no mighty work there, EXCEPT that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them", a strange power failure that still heals the sick. The "could not" is not a dead battery; it is commonly understood as the grammar of covenant. Miracles in the Gospels are not stunts performed AT spectators; they are encounters of faith, signs given to invite belief (CCC 548), and where unbelief bolts the door, the Lord who respects freedom will not blast through it. Nazareth's problem is the deadliest kind: not hostility but familiarity, "we know his trade, we know his family, so we know him." He "marveled because of their unbelief." The warning for church-raised people in this room is direct: you can know everything ABOUT Jesus and still keep the door shut.

2. **The sending (6:7-13): two by two, authority over unclean spirits, and a packing list of nearly nothing. Why the enforced poverty? And read verse 13 slowly: what are the Twelve doing with OIL, and where does the Church say that practice ends up?**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The poverty is the credential: heralds who carry no bread, bag, or money are walking proof that the kingdom sustains its messengers; their dependence preaches before they open their mouths. Two by two supplies witness (Deuteronomy 19:15) and communion, mission is never solo in this Gospel. And verse 13: "they anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them." The Church cites this very verse as alluding to the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, instituted by Christ and commended to the Church's practice in James 5:14-15 (CCC 1511): "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the presbyters of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." When a priest anoints a sick person today, he is doing what the Twelve began in

Galilee: the Church recognizes in his ministry its flowering.

Read Mark 6:14-29 aloud.

3. **Herod's banquet (6:14-29).** Mark places John's death between the apostles' sending and their return, and stages it as a feast. First: inventory Herod's feelings about John in verses 19-20. He feared him, protected him, "heard him gladly." So how does THIS man end up serving a prophet's head on a platter, and what is the two-banquets contrast Mark is building?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Herod's tragedy is the tragedy of admiration without obedience. He knew John was "a righteous and holy man," kept him safe, enjoyed listening, and was "much perplexed", a man circling conversion for months. But he never obeyed the message, and unrepented sin kept its hooks in him (Herodias). Then one rash oath before dinner guests, and he murders the man he admired rather than lose face, "sorry" the whole time (6:26). Sorrow that will not act is complicity with a sad expression. St. Ambrose's verdict stands: a wicked oath must be broken, not kept; keeping it was the greater sin. The placement preaches too: sandwiched inside the apostles' mission, John's death shows the sent ones what witness can cost, the forerunner goes before the Lord in death as in birth. And hold the image: a royal banquet where power devours the just, set immediately against the banquet Jesus is about to host, where the Shepherd feeds the hungry for free. Two kingdoms, two tables. The whole Gospel asks which one you will eat at.

Read Mark 6:30-44 aloud.

4. **The feeding, part one: the setting.** Verse 34: Jesus sees the crowd "as sheep without a shepherd." **DISCOVERY:** half look up Numbers 27:16-17, half look up Ezekiel 34:5 and 34:15. Whose words is Mark quoting, and what do both passages promise?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Numbers 27: Moses, about to die, begs God to appoint a successor "that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep which have no shepherd", and God gives Joshua (Hebrew Yehoshua, the name that later yields Yeshua, Jesus). Ezekiel 34: God indicts Israel's failed shepherd-kings who fed themselves and scattered the flock, and makes a double promise: "I MYSELF will be the shepherd of my sheep" (34:15) and "I will set up over them ONE SHEPHERD, my servant David" (34:23). Both promises, God shepherding in person, and a new David shepherding, converge on the man standing in front of this crowd. And notice his first act of compassion is not the food: "he began to TEACH them many things." Word first, then bread, the two tables (see St. Bede on your Take-Home).

5. **The feeding, part two: the details.** Mark alone tells us the grass was GREEN and the crowd reclined on it in ordered groups "by hundreds and by fifties." **DISCOVERY:** someone read Psalm 23:1-5 aloud, and someone else 2 Kings 4:42-44. What is being staged on that hillside, and how does the Elisha story measure it?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The scene reads like Psalm 23 staged line by line: the LORD is my shepherd; he makes me LIE DOWN in GREEN pastures; you prepare a TABLE before me. Mark's green grass is not weather trivia; it invites you to hear which psalm you are standing inside, and to ask who, therefore, the Shepherd hosting this table must be. The hundreds and fifties echo Moses' ordering of Israel in the

wilderness (Exodus 18:21): this crowd is being constituted as a people. And Elisha is the measuring stick: the greatest feeding miracle of the prophets was a hundred men from twenty loaves, with the same skeptical objection from a servant ("How am I to set this before a hundred men?") and the same surplus. Jesus: five thousand men, five loaves, twelve baskets of fragments, long read as one per tribe of Israel. The prophets' greatest work is his rounding error.

6. **The feeding, part three: the verbs. Read 6:41 aloud slowly and list the four things Jesus does with the loaves. Write them on something. Where will you hear those four verbs again, in that order, and who distributes the bread?**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Took, blessed, broke, gave. Do not explain further; just make sure every person in the room has said the four verbs out loud and knows Mass well enough to feel the floor tilt. If someone makes the Last Supper connection aloud, smile and say "hold that thought; this Gospel is not done with bread." Note the delivery system as well: Jesus gives the bread "to the disciples to set before the people", the Shepherd feeds the flock through the Twelve, a pattern with a very long future. And the fragments are gathered, twelve baskets: in God's economy, superabundance, and nothing wasted (CCC 1335 makes the Church's reading explicit for you as leader, but let the group discover rather than be told).

Read Mark 6:45-56 aloud.

7. **The sea-walking (6:45-52) contains the strangest clause in Mark: "He meant to PASS BY them." That sounds like he was going to walk past his struggling friends. DISCOVERY: someone look up Exodus 33:19-22, someone 1 Kings 19:11, and someone Job 9:8. What does "passing by" mean in those scenes, and what is Jesus' greeting in verse 50 hiding in plain sight?**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

"Passing by" is theophany vocabulary, the technical language of God showing his glory to a human being: God makes all his goodness PASS BY Moses in the cleft of the rock; the LORD PASSES BY Elijah at Horeb in wind, earthquake, and fire; and Job says God "alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea... he passes by me, and I see him not." Mark is telling us what kind of scene the language invites us to read: the Twelve being shown what Moses and Elijah were shown. Treading the sea is God's signature (Job 9:8), and the greeting, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear," is in Greek *ego eimi*, on the surface a friend saying "it's me", and, in this theophanic setting, carrying for many readers the unmistakable undertone of the divine I AM (Exodus 3:14). Underneath, the divine Name spoken over the waters. Then Mark's devastating editorial verdict on the Twelve: "they were utterly astounded, for THEY DID NOT UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE LOAVES, but their hearts were hardened." Mark links their blindness on the sea to the bread on the grass: read the loaves rightly and you know who walks the water. The bread is an identity revelation, and the disciples flunked the first exam. Keep your eye on that thread.

8. **STEELMAN, build it strong before you answer it. A popular modern reading says: "The real miracle was sharing. Moved by the boy's example, everyone brought out the food they had hidden in their cloaks, and there was enough for all. Beautiful, and no physics were harmed." Build the case at its best: it preserves a moral lesson, avoids credulity, and appeals to people who respect science. Then test it against Mark's actual text and the shape of the chapter.**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Give the theory its due: sharing IS beautiful, the reading is motivated by honest discomfort with miracles, and Christians should never sneer at that discomfort. Now the text. Mark's account runs on counted specifics: two hundred denarii would not suffice (the disciples did the math), exactly five loaves and two fish located after a search, five thousand men counted in ordered groups, and TWELVE BASKETS of fragments collected, an audited surplus. "And all ate and were satisfied" from what Jesus took, blessed, broke, and gave: the narrative grammar makes the loaves in his hands the source. The sharing theory has to be smuggled in; no evangelist hints at hidden lunches, no ancient reader, friendly or hostile, is on record proposing it; it enters the commentaries with nineteenth-century rationalism (H.E.G. Paulus) and later liberal preaching. And Mark forecloses it himself at 6:52 and 8:17-21, where Jesus treats the loaves as a revelation the disciples failed to understand, and quizzes them on the numbers. Nobody is mystified by a potluck. Deeper still: the theory quietly assumes the thing in question, that the man who (in this same chapter) treads the sea as only God does could not multiply bread. If Mark 1:1 is true, the feeding is not a physics problem; it is the Creator doing openly what he does in every wheat field (St. Augustine's point). And the stakes are higher than one miracle: these four verbs are headed to an upper room, where "this is my body" will demand the same choice between a comfortable reduction and taking him at his word.

Dig Deeper

Verse 53-56 quietly closes the loop of last session: at Gennesaret the sick beg to touch "even the fringe of his garment; and as many as touched it were made well." What one desperate woman risked alone in chapter 5 has become the confident practice of whole villages. Grace through contact, now at scale, and a picture of what the Church's sacramental life is: what she risked once, the Church, by Christ's own institution, now offers to all: his healing touch through appointed signs.

Send (15 minutes)

1. Herod admired, protected, and gladly heard the man he ended up killing, because admiration never became obedience. Where in your life are you a fan of Jesus rather than a follower, agreeing warmly, obeying never? Name one concrete step from admiration to obedience.
2. The disciples answered a crowd's hunger with a budget ("two hundred denarii would not be enough") and Jesus answered it with what was in his hands. Where are you currently telling God a need is mathematically impossible, and what five loaves are actually in your hands?

Live It This Week

- At Mass this week, listen for the four verbs, took, blessed, broke, gave, and when you hear them, silently pray: "Lord, I want to understand about the loaves."
- Answer one impossible need with your actual loaves: give the small thing you have (an hour, a meal, a skill) to a need that dwarfs it, and let him do the multiplication.
- If someone you love is seriously ill or facing a serious operation, tell them about the Anointing of the Sick this week: it is not reserved to the dying (CCC 1514-1515).

Closing Prayer

Leader: Lord Jesus, Shepherd of the green grass, you teach before you feed and you feed beyond our arithmetic. Walk to us across whatever we are straining against tonight, say "Take heart, it is I," and do not let our hearts stay hard about the loaves. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. (Together: one Our Father.)

Scripture Memory Verse

"Take heart, it is I; have no fear." (Mark 6:50, RSV2CE)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Primary text: Mark 6

Every passage used this session, in order:

- Mark 6:1-6 (rejection at Nazareth)
- Mark 6:7-13 (the sending; anointing with oil)
- James 5:14-15 (anointing fulfilled in the Church)
- Deuteronomy 19:15 (two witnesses, leader background)
- Mark 6:14-29 (Herod's banquet; death of John)
- Mark 6:30-44 (feeding of the five thousand)
- Numbers 27:16-17 (sheep without a shepherd)
- Ezekiel 34:5, 15, 23 (God the Shepherd; the new David)
- Psalm 23 (green pastures, the table)
- Exodus 18:21 (hundreds and fifties)
- 2 Kings 4:42-44 (Elisha's feeding, the template)
- Exodus 16 (manna, leader background)
- Mark 6:45-52 (walking on the sea; ego eimi)
- Exodus 33:19-22; 1 Kings 19:11 (God passes by)
- Job 9:8, 11 (trampling the waves; passing by)
- Exodus 3:14 (I AM)
- Mark 6:53-56 (the fringe of his garment)
- Mark 8:17-21 (leader background for the steelman)
- CCC 548-549, 1335, 1506-1509, 1511
- Memory verse: Mark 6:50