

## Homily: 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

At the end of the Gospel last Sunday we heard that the crowd wanted to take Jesus by force and make Him king. He had just fed 5000 people, and – delighted by the bread they had received – they decided that Jesus should be their ruler. But their plan was not His: He slipped away and escaped back into the hills by Himself. Later He will tell Pilate that He is indeed a King, but that His Kingdom is not of this world. He is less interested in earthly things than in heavenly ones, and all the time He is trying to raise our minds from this life to our true, eternal life with God.

Today these same people come looking for Jesus after He has crossed the lake. They cannot understand how He has got there, and so ask Him, “When did you get here?” Jesus does not answer the question, but instead points out their motive: “You are not looking for me because you saw the signs, but because you had all the bread you wanted to eat.” And so, He invites them to raise their minds upwards, to aim higher: “Do not work for the food that cannot last, but work for the food that endures to eternal life.” This food, He says, is “to believe in the One God has sent” – in other words, to believe in Him. If we come to Him and believe in Him, He says, we will never be hungry or thirsty. He can satisfy all our needs. It is a big claim. Do we truly believe this?

The crowd didn’t, so they ask for proof. “What sign can you give to show that we should believe in you?” they ask. But He has already given an incredible sign: He has fed the 5000 with only five loaves and two fish. The crowd knew they had been fed, but somehow didn’t really recognise the miracle – they failed to understand what it was showing them about Jesus. They remind Jesus that, under Moses, the people of Israel received the mysterious manna in the desert, what the psalm calls “bread from heaven”. In this way, they are really challenging the Lord to produce something at least as convincing. “This was the sign Moses gave”, they say: “What will You do to prove Yourself?”

Jesus reminds them that it was not Moses, but God, who really gave them bread. And now the same God gives something much greater than either the manna or Moses. The gift is Jesus, the Bread of Life, who gives His flesh for the life of the world. The Gospel subtly points out to us that Jesus is much greater than Moses. Moses used to talk to God face-to-face, but Jesus *is* God; Moses’ face shone when He had been speaking with God, but Jesus, the Light of the World, shines with His own brightness, especially at the Transfiguration. The manna in the Old Testament lasted only a day or so, but Jesus is the bread which endures to eternal life. Moses famously parted the waters of the Red Sea so that the Israelites could cross, but Jesus – in between the feeding of the 5000 and this dialogue – has walked on the water. That’s how He crossed the lake. The key point is this: Moses liberated the people from earthly oppression, slavery under Pharaoh – it was a need they had for this life; but Jesus liberates us from sin and death, and so fulfils our need of eternal life. He is always concerned to give us the greatest gifts, not ones which pass away.

There is a huge gulf between what the people want – signs to prove their faith, bread for their stomachs – and what the Lord wants to give: eternal life. They are not

aiming high enough! When I think about my life, I can see how much time and energy I give to things which are passing, and how little I sometimes give to things that are eternal. I think we all do this. We are concerned with the problems in front of us and so forget to work towards eternal life. Scripture is always reminding us to think again. In the Gospel, Jesus teaches us to seek first the Kingdom of God, and let everything else take second place. When St Paul teaches us about love ("Love is patient, love is kind," etc.) he begins by encouraging us to "be ambitious for the higher gifts." Elsewhere he tells us to keep our eyes fixed on the things of heaven, not on those of earth. In today's second reading he tells us not to live an "aimless life", like the pagans. An "aimless life" is one which has no aim, no destination. But our life does: we are destined for eternal life; that is our goal, our aim. All the time we are being reminded not to lose sight of eternity. A full stomach may satisfy us now, but we'll be hungry again tomorrow. And there are plenty of people with more than enough food and money, but with a real emptiness in their hearts. We need to pay attention also to the deepest longings of our hearts, the desire for eternity, the desire to be loved by God and to love Him in return. We constantly need to be reminded to raise our eyes to heaven, and not to get overly preoccupied with earthly worries.

The Eucharist is our constant reminder to do just that. Every Sunday we gather around the altar, and here raise our hearts and minds to God. We are reminded that this life is not all there is: there is also heaven, and we are united with those in heaven in the eternal song of praise. Without Sunday Mass, our minds quickly get bogged down with our daily concerns. Perhaps you leave Mass feeling more at peace than when you arrive. I know I do. And this is precisely why: because it raises our minds upwards to heaven, to the eternal gifts that God gives, and so it puts today's concerns into perspective.

The people today ask Jesus for a sign: they want proof of who Jesus is more than they want the gift! But Jesus is both: He is the sign and He is the gift. And where something is both a sign and a gift, it is a sacrament. Jesus, the Bread of Life, is the sacrament of our salvation. He, in the form of bread and wine, is the sign of God's love; and this Bread and Wine, consecrated to become His Body and Blood, are the gift of life, life which ultimately will satisfy all our needs and longings. Jesus knows we have many day to day needs and concerns, and He does not in any way dismiss them; but He also teaches us to look beyond these to our deepest need: the need of God and the life He offers, a life shared with us in Jesus, the Bread who has come down from heaven for our salvation.

Fr Andrew

