

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) Sunday August 8th 2021

From the Presbytery in Petworth I can walk into the town and choose from, I don't know, maybe 20 or 30 different sorts of bread. Bread in our culture has been transformed into rather a smart ingredient, spread with smashed avocado, a soft poached egg, a bit of tabasco and some salt and pepper – or whatever, you choose! But bread, which is one of the oldest foods that you don't need to hunt or forage for, is in most cases a subsistence food. It is what people eat to stop themselves from starving. When the revolutionaries in France wanted to drive the population to rise up against the king, their not very subtle trick was to make sure there was no bread; and when there was no bread, the people rebelled. Whatever it may be in *our* society, for most of history, and for most of the world, bread was what kept body and soul together.

When Christ says 'I am the bread of life', then, he knows what he is doing. He is not comparing himself to a luxury food, to something that only some people can afford, or that some prefer to potatoes or to rice, he is very consciously and clearly saying: 'I am what stands between you and starvation'. But, more than this, he is saying that he is the lively bread, bread that does more than preserve life, it enriches and enhances it. The one who eats this lively bread is made more lively because he or she is now set on fire by the liveliness that they have consumed. The Bread of Life satisfies the spiritual hunger that is a part of every human being. It answers the question that is written into every human soul: what should I do, who should I become, what is life for? When you have consumed this bread, not carelessly but knowing what it is that you are consuming, then in that moment all is well, everything falls into place and the beautiful order of God and his creation is there to see: and then broken humanity intervenes and shakes it all up again, so that already we are longing for the next time.

You may have heard of Cardinal Thuan, who died almost 20 years ago. He was appointed as Archbishop of Saigon in 1975, just days before the city fell to the communists. The archbishop was arrested and imprisoned in 're-education' camps of one sort or another for 13 years, most of it in solitary confinement. But through those years, after an initial time of despair, he began to develop a simple spiritual path to survive. He wrote messages to his people that were smuggled out and distributed by hand. He cared for his fellow prisoners and captors alike. But he found his life in the Mass. The Bread of Life was what kept his soul alive. He said Mass in secret, using a little wine and altar bread that had been smuggled in. When he was sharing a bed with 50 others, he brought the Christian prisoners close to him and said Mass for them after the lights went out; they then took it in turn to watch through the night in prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament, which was concealed in the pocket of his shirt. He had no chalice, of course, and so he cupped his hand and that became the chalice for the few drops of wine that could be spared each day. Much later, after his release, he would say:

'Jesus gives us everything we need in the Eucharist: love, the art of loving, loving always, loving with a smile, loving right away and loving our enemies, loving by forgiving, forgetting having forgiven.'

If this was all there is to it, it would still be pretty good. But there is more. In our first reading we heard about Elijah, who has just triumphed in a test over the prophets of Baal, and has put them all to death. But Queen Jezebel has threatened to kill him, and he is running for his life. So he sits under a bush in the desert and wishes he was dead. But there is still work to be done. He is fed with the angel's bread not simply to stop him being hungry, but because he has a job to do, he needs to get on with it, and to get on with it he needs to be fed. He must go to mount Horeb, where he is going to have that extraordinary encounter with God, who is not in the hurricane, or in the earthquake, or in the fire, but is in the still small voice that fills him with awe. And then, after this encounter with the power of God, he must go back, back to make more mischief for the leaders that have deserted the truth, back to build up the faith and strength of Israel. Elijah is fed with bread not just for his own benefit, but for the good of the people. This lively bread is alive with a life for the whole world, not just for the people that eat it.

And this, of course, is precisely what Jesus himself says at the end of our Gospel reading:

'The bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world'.

The Eucharist is an antidote to our pride. We cannot make it happen on our own, we depend entirely on God to feed us. It is an antidote to the illusion that we are all-powerful and can do whatever we wish: try as we might, we cannot turn the ordinary bread into the Bread of Life, only God can. We cannot take, all we can do is receive. It is the antidote to our anxiety and our sorrow, because when God acts, things happen: ordinary bread becomes the Bread of Life. It is the antidote to our self-obsession, our greed, our desire to possess, because it is a gift freely given, given with no cost, no price. It is an antidote to our tendency to value things only for their appearances, to rate the things we see and desire so highly, because here we must use our souls to see the value and the meaning. The exercise we give our souls in doing so helps us see not just the sacred host, but also the world around us, as they truly are. And when this happens, we see the world and the people in it very differently, and so the world is a better place: 'My flesh, for the life of the world'.

'Jesus gives us everything we need in the Eucharist: love, the art of loving, loving always, loving with a smile, loving right away and loving our enemies, loving by forgiving, forgetting having forgiven.'