

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time  
(Year B)  
Sunday August 22nd 2021

This Gospel passage comes at the end of an excursion into the Gospel of St John. We have had five weeks away from working through Mark's Gospel, and it ends today. We have heard about the feeding of the five thousand, a miraculous meal that starts with just a few loaves and some fish, and then we have heard Jesus speak about himself as the Bread of Life, which I have been explaining is a lively bread, the bread of liveliness, lively food for those who choose to live a lively life. That lively bread is what we receive at Mass. Human beings are not just physical creatures, but we are spiritual beings as well. To feed the body but starve the soul is a perverse sort of self neglect; it leaves a hunger inside, a hunger that we may not recognise or understand, but all the same a hunger which makes us feel on some level that all is not well.

So now this passage comes to an end with a sharp division. Everyone has seen the same thing: they have seen a large crowd fed in a way that is beyond explaining. They have also all heard the same things; they have heard Jesus speak about Moses and the bread from Heaven, and about the bread of life, bread given for the life of the world; they have heard Jesus describe himself as the bread of life, bread which is real food; and they have heard him speak about himself as the Son of Man, ready to ascend to the place from which he came. All have seen the same things, all have heard the same things. And yet their reactions are sharply divided: some of them say 'this is intolerable language' and they desert him; others follow Peter when he says 'Who shall we go to, you have the message of eternal life'. How does this happen? What is the difference between those two groups, and why do they react so differently? How is it that some of the people who ate the miraculous bread and fish now reject the one who gave them, while others cling to him still more tightly, as he has the message of eternal life?

St Peter, I think, gives us the answer when he says 'Lord, who shall we go to?' He recognises that if Jesus is not their Lord, if he is not the one who trains them in the art of living, they would have to find another. He has understood that it is a part of the human condition to search for one who can guide us. None of us is capable of navigating every situation in life alone, because life is so complex, so fraught with challenges, that we cannot achieve the distance and detachment necessary to make wise choices every time. Our passions and our emotions intervene, and indeed so do our selfishness and our sinfulness; we respond instinctively with our fallen damaged human nature, and we need someone who stands outside that. We need a guide who will travel with us in discovering the art of living, the trick of being human. If it is not the Lord, the one who has the message of eternal life, then who will it be? Who will be our guide? When the disgruntled crowd left Jesus, who did they turn to as a guide and wise shepherd?

We do need to realise that there are many voices out there calling out to us 'Follow me'. They may do so blatantly, or in subtle ways, but all of them are trying to guide us in their own version of the art of living. So, if I turn away from the message of eternal life, who will teach me the art of living? Will I try and be my own guide? There is an old saying that the one who makes himself his own teacher has made himself the pupil of a fool. When I am angry, or frightened, or anxious, or hurt, or in any other way overcome with emotion, will I make a good guide to myself in the art of living? I don't think so. So who else is there who is forming me? Who else will teach me the art of living? The Daily Telegraph, or The Guardian (or whatever newspaper you choose)? Some Instagram Influencer or blogger? A magazine editor? A political party, or the government of the day? Are any of these seriously up for competing with the word of life? Who is forming my opinions? Who am I listening to? In the digital age, do I even know that the people I read about are actually who they say they are? Are they really able to teach me the art of living? Isn't this so important that I really need to think hard about this? To whom shall we go, indeed – surely to the one who has the message of eternal life.

I know that sometimes the Church can disappoint us, even hurt us. But when we stop to look, in fact the scandals in the Church are about the failures of a few sinful people, broken and damaged people, people who it turns out have been among the ones who on some level turned away from Christ. To expect the Church's members and leaders to be perfect all the time would be an intolerable burden, there would be no-one left; and those of us who know we are so far from perfect would hardly feel at home in such a place. Individuals within the Church often fail, and sometimes very badly. They let us down. But has the Lord of Life let us down? No, not him.

So as some of the disciples turn away from Jesus at the end of today's Gospel story, I would want to ask them: who, then, will teach you the art of living? You are going to be following someone, even if you do not realise it, who will it be? 'As for me and my house', to steal some words from Joshua, 'we will serve the Lord'.

*"If the art of living remains an unknown, nothing else works."*

Pope Benedict XVI (as Cardinal Ratzinger)  
Address at the Jubilee of Catechists, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2000