

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Sunday 17 of Ordinary Time (Year B)
Sunday July 25th 2021

The sharp-eyed among you will have noticed that we have swapped readings from Mark's Gospel for readings from John. Today begins a series of five weeks from John's Gospel inserted into the narrative from St Mark, and these all follow the theme of Jesus the Bread of Life.

Jesus has been to Jerusalem for a festival, and while he was there he was healing and preaching, and now he has left for the countryside again. But still the crowds follow him because they are '*impressed by the signs he gave by curing the sick*'. If we pause here for a moment, this is a strange use of words. It seems that they are not impressed by the healings themselves, nor are they coming to be healed – they are impressed by the signs he gave when he healed the sick. It is the healing as a sign that hits them, more than the fact of making people whole again. Jesus has healed people, and that is, of course, an act of love and mercy, but what really impresses people even more is that it is a sign. But what sort of sign, what does it mean?

St John's Gospel is full of signs, and fortunately he explains for us just what the signs mean. Towards the end of his Gospel St John says:

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." (Jn 20.30-31)

The signs that Jesus gives are given so that people can learn who he really is, and learning that they can believe in him, and believing in him can find wholeness and salvation. The signs that impressed the crowds were making them ask: 'Who is this man? What might he be to me? Could this mean I need to change the way I live?' And as they ask these questions they follow him to listen to what he says, and to see if there will be any more signs. And that is the context of today's story. They have an inkling that there is something remarkable here, and they want to find out more.

There is one more thing that we need to remember as we read this story. The people of Israel are always, then and now, deeply marked by the story of the Exodus, of Moses leading them out of slavery and into freedom. Part of that story is their hunger in the desert, and Moses feeding them with Manna, bread from heaven. The crowd is wondering who this man is, wondering what these signs mean, and then they get another, unexpected sign. This is not a healing, it is a feeding. Moses gave them just enough bread each day to survive, Jesus gives them more than they can possibly eat. The sign shows them that there is something – or someone – far greater even than Moses here. Moses was the man who had the great privilege of seeing God face to face, of living in his presence; but here is one who is greater than Moses: could it be, could it possibly be, that he is not just one who lives in God's presence, could it possibly be that he is – no surely not – but could he truly be, in some way, God himself? That is the question this sign of the feeding makes them ask themselves. Who is this man, and what is he to me? It is a question that we all need to ask ourselves, and as that

miraculous meal continues throughout the ages and in every generation, as we ourselves join the queue to be fed, the question should be bouncing around in our minds, too. This Jesus who we have heard about, this Jesus who feeds us, feeds us even with himself, who is he to me? What does knowing him mean for me?

It is quite interesting to assess our reaction to this story. Of course, it is very familiar to us, we know how it is going to play out from the very beginning, but if we had been there on that hillside, what might we have thought? If we had watched this happening, seen the bread and the fish being handed round, seen the crowds fed beyond their expectations, how would we have reacted? Would we have said (as we tend to know) yes that's another nice story about Jesus? Or would we have looked on in wonder and said: 'Wow – if he can do that, what else can he do?' The sign is not meant to be a full stop, where the story of a crowd on a hillside runs to a happy ending; it is meant to challenge us and make us ask questions. If he can feed five thousand people with a little bread and some fish, what else might he be able to do?

This feeding is a sign that points to the fact that the five thousand are in the presence of someone unique. They are in the presence of the Holy One. If he can do this with bread, what might he do with wine – of course, we know the answer to that from Cana; what might he do with water, then; we know the answer to that from the Jordan; what might he do with sick people, with sinners, with the dead. This sign is given to us to open our minds so that we say: Will you look at that! Here is something unique, here is something greater even than Moses, here is the Holy One. If he can do that with bread, what might he do with me! Who is he? What will he be to me? How might he use me to feed the world – not just with bread but with hope, and peace, and wisdom and faith and joy. What will be the next chapter in the story in which my life and his collide?