

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for Corpus Christi (Year A) 11<sup>th</sup> June 2023

The passage that we have heard from the Gospel follows shortly after Jesus has fed a great crowd with just five loaves and two fish. This seems to have entranced the crowd, and they have been following him, almost pursuing him, since it happened. What will he do next? Jesus realises that he needs to break the misunderstanding that this is some sort of magic show; the miracle was never about clocking up 'ooohs' and 'aaaahs'; it was about showing the people who he really is. It was never about quelling physical hunger for an afternoon; it was about filling spiritual hunger for eternity. It was not about making people comfortable, it was about making them whole, complete, more human.

So it seems that he will have to shock them into understanding. 'It is me', he tells them; 'I am the bread that has come down from Heaven, I am the bread of life, I am the medicine of the sickening soul, I am the food of life'. For some of them this is too much. This was not what they wanted, it is too difficult, too unexpected, requires too radical a shift of mind, and so they turn away.

If you want to understand what Jesus is trying to say in this passage, look carefully at the words he uses. In this short section one word comes back again and again: life/live/lively/living appears eleven times in this short passage. If you want to understand what Jesus is about, this word provides the key. Jesus comes into the world to lead us into life: not just to help us towards life for eternity, but to help us become more alive now, today, every day. If you want to be more human, more real, more alive, he is the key. It is very possible, frighteningly possible, to be alive but not lively, to exist from day to day more than to be really living. The disciples are the people who see this, and see in Jesus the solution. Jesus, the lively bread, is the food of the lively human being.

As the crowds flock to see Jesus, most of them it seems are looking for tricks and for excitement, for memories to go home and tell the family about; only a few are truly travelling with him, trying to journey with him on the only journey that matters in life, the journey from the person you are now to the person that God dreams you might become. Jesus explains to them all that there is no other food that will suffice for this journey: if we are not being fed with the bread of life, we are not on the journey, we are just marking time. There is no other bread that can feed the soul; and if our souls are not lively with the bread of life, then we cannot be fully alive.

This feast, then, is the great feast of lively living. Without the living bread, human life is pathetically impoverished. This is what drove the martyrs of Abitene, a village in what is now Tunisia. In the year 304 the Roman Emperor had forbidden Christians from gathering together for Sunday Mass, but 49 of them were caught celebrating Mass together. Before being tortured and killed they were asked why they had disregarded the Emperor's command. They had replied by stating the simple truth that Jesus sets before us in today's Gospel: '*Sine dominico non possumus*'

– without Sunday Mass we cannot live, there is no life<sup>1</sup>. They wanted to be alive, not merely to exist. This is our faith as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ: without Sunday Mass there is no life. This Feast of Corpus Christi is our annual reminder of this, so that we do not forget just how extraordinary, just how unlike anything else we do the Mass is.

And this, really, is the key: Mass is not just one of the things that we do during the week, competing with a thousand others for our attention and our time. Mass is unique, it is completely different from everything else that we do. Other things may be fun, may be exciting, may be entertaining, may help us grow as people, may challenge us and enrich us. But not one of them draws us into life the way that Mass does. There is the Mass, which is our life, where we breathe deeply the air of Heaven, and there is everything else: without Sunday Mass, the words ring out across the centuries, we cannot live.

In the Mass we breathe the fragrant air of Heaven; we are confronted with the Law of Gift – we become more human according to how generous we are, how much we give away; we receive the loving touch of the divine; we are forced to acknowledge our dependence, we cannot feed our own souls, we simply need to allow God to feed them for us. Above all, we encounter God himself. This Risen Lord who we meet is full of life, and the more we allow him to take over our lives, the more lively we become ourselves: ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ (Galatians 2.20) says St Paul.

Corpus Christi reminds us that our faith is not primarily about doctrines, important as those are; nor is it chiefly about moral commands, much as they can help us navigate a complicated world. Corpus Christi reminds us that our faith is first and foremost about a person, the person of Jesus Christ; it is about meeting him and being overwhelmed by him so that we hardly dare approach the altar, if it were not for his humility that calls us forward, all broken and unworthy, so that he can make us more alive.

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<sup>1</sup> See Homily of Pope Benedict at Eucharistic Congress in Bari 29<sup>th</sup> May 2005