



Homilies for 18th Sunday Year B by Fr Robert Henshaw AA

1991

During this month the Gospel readings are more or less continuous. The reading we have just heard follows on from last week's reading. That was the story of one of Jesus' most striking miracles when he fed five thousand people from a handful of loaves and fishes. They were so impressed that they tried to force him to become their king and he had to escape into the hills to get away from them. But the next day some of them caught up with him. That's the point at which we pick up the story today.

What follows is one of those dialogues at cross-purposes when people think they are talking about the same thing but in fact there is a deep misunderstanding.

When Jesus fed the people out in the wilderness he was expressing his concern for their material needs. He could see that they were tired and hungry and he wanted to help them.

But he also wanted what he did to be a sign of a deeper concern. He has come into the world not just to provide for people's material needs, not to be their earthly king, but to satisfy all their needs and wants to be for them the bread of life. "He who comes to me shall not hunger and he who believes in me shall never thirst."

In saying this Jesus is hoping that the miracle of the loaves will draw people on to faith in him not just as a provider but as their saviour, as the one who can fulfil the deep desires of their hearts for peace and security, healing and wholeness, meaning and purpose, not just momentarily but permanently, everlasting. That is what he means by food that endures to eternal life.

The people who were listening to Jesus were not thinking on that level at all. In a way there are like ourselves when we say, "It's all very well talking about the bread of life, but real life is having several mouths to feed, it's keeping up the mortgage payments, clothing for the kids, meeting household expenses, keeping one's job, coping with bad health." Well it's true, these are realities but are they the only realities?

As Jesus says to the crowds. "Alright you are hungry and you wanted to be fed. You enjoyed the food that I gave you but the satisfaction doesn't last, you will be hungry again." And the sick person is healed - but it's only for a time, one day they will die. Is life simply an endless rat-race when we are constantly chasing satisfactions which don't last?

That's why Jesus says that his miracles of feeding and healing and changing the water into wine are not just a response to immediate needs. They are signs of a greater, enduring satisfaction that he offers. Is material satisfaction and prosperity all that we need and want? The human heart yearns for an infinite satisfaction - we are made for infinity and ultimately only God can satisfy us. The great invitation of the Gospel is that it is through Jesus that we find God. He who believes in me will never thirst. He is himself the way to fullness of life.

1994

This is the time of the year when parents and children start thinking about new school uniform. But of course it isn't only children who get new clothes when they are starting out on a new venture. Adults too who are starting a new job, or embarking on a new stage of their lives or maybe if they just want to get out of a rut and make a fresh start. Often instinctively they will go out and buy some new clothes. It's true isn't it that wearing a new suit, or a new dress or even just a new pair of shoes, gives you a psychological lift.

In the early church when adults were baptized they took off all their old clothes and they were clothed anew in a beautiful white robe. There is still a remnant of that custom in the present baptism of babies when a white shawl is put round the baby and the priest says "You have clothed yourself in Christ, you have become a new creation."

The outward change of clothes is a symbol of an inward change. In the 2nd reading today St. Paul says "You must put aside your old self and put on a new self." After a while clothes become worn and faded, torn and stained and St. Paul is saying that our lives are rather like that - they can become grubby and shabby, they are stained by sin and pulled out of their true shape by bad habits. It would be great if we could just put on a new self - a perfect, unflawed self, like a new suit of clothes.

In a way this is what is meant to happen - but it doesn't happen overnight. Through our baptism we have put on Christ - but it takes a long time for the reality of this change to penetrate every part of our personality, our self.

When a soldier puts on his/her uniform in a sense he becomes a different person. He is a servant of his country, his uniform reminds him to show courage, loyalty, devotion to duty and to an end these military qualities begin to shape his life.

When we put on Christ we become new people and our minds and hearts take on the qualities of Christ. Every time we try to be loving, forgiving, compassionate, caring, unselfish, truthful and obedient to God we are growing a little bit more like Christ. We are letting his spirit influence us more because it is the mission of the Spirit to make us other Christs, seeing, thinking and feeling as Christ does. This is a process. It's something that happens over time as we struggle against our 'old self' - our natural self, so that instead of saying I am a Christian - it might be better to say "I am becoming a Christian - I am on the way to being a true follower of Christ." As I say, it's a struggle and we need to be sustained in that struggle. Our inner strength comes from Christ himself. That's why in today's Gospel he says "I am the bread of life." in him we find the inner resources we need to grow strong in the spirit and to be completely re-made in his likeness.

1997

Last Sunday's Gospel was a bit overlooked because we had that interesting missionary appeal by Fr. Horgan. (an appeal, incidentally that met with a very generous response - over £760).

Well the Gospel was the story of one of Our Lord's most striking miracles when he fed five thousand people with a handful of loaves and fishes. There was an immediate popular reaction to this. The crowd wanted to make him their leader - they wanted him to be their king and he had to escape into the hills to get away from them and let things calm down.

All that was described last Sunday and today's Gospel takes up the story the next day when the more persistent people in the crowd finally track Jesus down again. Basically they want more of the same. They want him to continue supplying them with food. That is why they are enthusiastic about him. And he knows that and confronts them; He says You've come looking for me not because you realize the significance of what I did but because I fed you. I filled your stomachs and for free! Now you want more.

That's what we call plain speaking but Jesus doesn't just leave it at that. He tries to open their minds to another possibility and he wants them to think of him in another way. After all he hadn't

come into the world just to provide for people's material needs - he wasn't going to be just another earthly ruler - a provider and protector.

He said the bread that I gave you yesterday was simply a sign of a much greater gift. I can keep giving you bread but you will be hungry again. I can keep healing your sicknesses, but it will only be for a time, eventually you will die. Is life then just an endless rat-race, pursuing one satisfaction after another but never finding any enduring happiness?

What Jesus is getting at is that his miracles of feeding the hungry and healing the sick are really only symbols of a much greater gift that he can offer - that gift is the satisfaction of their deepest hunger. The hunger of the human heart for love. True love is the giving of one person to another - the gift of themselves. What Jesus reveals is that God who is love wishes to give himself as a gift of love to each of us. In receiving this gift and surrendering ourselves to it we will find the fullness of life for which we were created.

Then Jesus goes on to say that he isn't only the bearer of this gift but he is the gift himself. He is the Bread of Life - the nourishment that our souls hunger for. Those who eat the bread of life will share the life of God forever.

All that we have to do to receive this gift is - well what does he say. He who comes to me - He who believes in me. He often uses similar words to these "Whoever loves me -" they are all different ways of describing the same thing. Namely that we trust him and commit ourselves to him. That we stick with him.

It is with Jesus and in him that we come to realize God's great love for us and our restless hearts find peace.

2003

Bread of Life.

There is a lot in today's readings about bread. I counted the word at least 16 times. Bread is a shorthand way of saying the basic necessities we need to keep life going. It's a powerful word. The communists come to power in Russia on the back of a slogan "Bread for the people and power to the Soviets". It was the promise of bread for a poor hungry population that won them support.

The basic necessities start with food, a roof over our head and clothing for our bodies. Then we need a job. And in our society many would consider a car and a phone as essential.

But as the Gospels remind us "man does not live by bread alone", we have other needs as well, inner needs. Of course sometimes we combine the two. If we are disappointed or lonely or sad, we can dull the pain. We can find comfort in a box of chocolates or a bottle of whiskey or a bout of shopping. But in our heart of hearts we know that these are only substitutes, material substitutes for a spiritual satisfaction of our inner hunger.

Nobody really believes that a shopping spree for example can give us what we truly need. It cannot bring peace or lasting happiness or satisfy the hunger of our souls. We hunger for lots of other things as well as possessions. We hunger for understanding, for recognition, for affection, a touch of kindness, for company, for success, for happiness, for peace of mind and none of these things will come to us simply because we buy a new car or a bigger house. Man does not live by bread alone.

At the root of all our inner needs and longings is a hunger for love, for a love that is constant, totally reliable, totally accepting of us - for divine love.

When Jesus says "I am the bread of life, he who comes to me will never be hungry" he is offering himself to us as the one who can fill our inner hunger. The one who can give meaning and purpose to our lives.