

HOMILY 17B 2015

“What’s your holiday reading this year?” That was an item in the newspaper the other day. “Books for the beach – what the famous are reading.” Well, whether we’re on holiday or not, the Church is giving us some great reading these Sundays. We’re reading the famous chapter 6 of St John’s Gospel. The chapter is spread out over five Sundays and it’s one of the most important parts of St John’s Gospel. It’s a chapter that should be seared into our souls.

The chapter begins with a small boy, a boy with five loaves and two fish. What was he doing there in that country place? It’s a place called Tabgha and it’s still an unspoilt piece of land. It climbs gently away from the edge of Lake Galilee. I think the little lad had gone fishing. His mother had given him some bread for the day and he’d caught two fish.

And Jesus took those simple things – the five loaves and the two fish – and with them he fed more than 5000 people. What a miracle that was! Doesn’t it remind us of the Last Supper? Again, Jesus took bread and gave thanks – and blessed and broke it and gave it to his apostles. Only *this* time he said, “Take, eat, this is my Body”. And then he told his apostles, “Do this in memory of me”. And so today, not just 5000 are fed but his disciples all around the world.

So today let's try to get an overview of this chapter 6 of St John's Gospel. Let's look at it briefly as a whole (not just the part we've heard today). And then over the next four Sundays I'll take one aspect of the Eucharist each week and speak of that.

Today we hear how Jesus fed the crowds of people. The part we will hear next Sunday ends like this: "Jesus replied, 'I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me will never be hungry. He who believes in me will never thirst'". He's talking to the people who had seen how he fed the 5000. And they're following him now hoping for more miracles, more food. But Jesus tells them to work for food that leads to eternal life. The true bread from heaven isn't *something*. It is *Someone*. "I am the Bread of Life."

The Sunday after that the Gospel moves on. It speaks of the food for the journey. It speaks about our journey through life towards our true home with God. And what is this food for the journey? Again, it's not *something*. It is *Someone*. "Whoever eats this bread will live for ever. And the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world."

As we read this chapter of St John's Gospel we go deeper into the Mystery of Faith. We see the Mass as the sacrifice of Calvary – something that happened nearly 2000 years ago but which is made present for us today. "The bread which I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world." Our Lord gave himself for us on Calvary. And he's

still with us when we offer Holy Mass and when we receive Holy Communion. And therefore we also see Holy Mass as a sacred meal. “My flesh (says Our Lord on the fourth Sunday) is real food. My blood is real drink.” Well, that’s too much for some of his disciples. They can’t take it. And in the final reading from this chapter six we hear that many of his disciples left him. But Jesus doesn’t water down what he’s said. He doesn’t call them back and say, no, you’ve misunderstood me. No, rather he emphasises what he’s said even more. “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.” And he even gives his closest friends, the apostles, a choice. “Will you also go away?” And then we hear those noble words of St Peter, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life.”

That’s a quick summary of this important part of St John’s Gospel. So I’ll take a different aspect of the Eucharist on each of the next four Sundays. I’ll speak about the Eucharist as *sacrifice*. What is the holy sacrifice of the Mass? I’ll speak about the Eucharist as *Sacrament* and the importance of Holy Communion. I’ll speak about the presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. What do we mean by the ‘*Real Presence*’? And I’ll speak about the Eucharist and *Our Blessed Lady*, because three Sundays from now it will be the solemnity of Our lady’s Assumption into heaven. So it will give us the chance to think about the Eucharist and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

So these next four Sundays of St John's Gospel are very important. We can learn a lot from this holiday reading. On these same Sundays we'll also read one of St Paul's letters. It's his letter to the church at Ephesus. And what St Paul writes in that letter chimes in very well with the Gospel. The Gospel is about the Holy Eucharist. It's about the sacrifice of the Mass and the food for our souls. It's about the one Bread (Jesus himself) making us one Body. St Paul is writing about that one Body of Christ. And how we are members of that Body and how we should therefore be of one mind and one heart.

So here's our holiday reading – the books for the beach as it were! There is the great reading the Church offers us over these five Sundays. A lot there to feed our minds and warm our hearts as we offer Mass either here in Prestwich or wherever in the world we may be. (And if you want to take the Mass sheets away with you if you're going on holiday please pick them up from the sacristy.)

I must also say a quick word about this year's Day for Life. Some years ago Pope St John Paul II saw that innocent human life was under great threat in these our times. So he asked for a Day for Life to be kept every year. The threat to life is very real. There are regular attempts now in our own country to pass a law in favour of euthanasia or assisted suicide. And as our bishop has said, these are important times for our nation. We must let our voices be heard. Heard both in prayer, and heard in standing up for the sacred gift of human life. As

Pope Francis has said, “How great a lie it is to make people think that lives affected by grave illness are not worth living.”

Our bishop also asks us to support the Anscombe Centre. The Anscombe Centre is right up there dealing with all new developments in medicine and technology. It’s a highly respected Centre that keeps ethics in the forefront of all the new developments. The Centre does crucial work and deserves our support in today’s collection.

And to end on a happy note. Congratulations to Mrs English here who celebrates her 100th birthday today. Mrs English is living proof that birthdays are good for you. The more you have, the longer you live!