

17th Sunday (B)

28th July 2024

‘Cibum ... Se dat suis manibus’

2Kings 4: Elisha gave the people to eat. Ps 144: *you give them their food in due time ...*
Eph 4: *one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism*
Jn 6: 1–15: feeding of the multitude

22 of us from Newman House were in Lourdes all last week. And apart from prayer times and liturgy in the main *domaine* of the shrine, near the Grotto, one afternoon we took a short trip out of the town centre, to the wooded edge of Lourdes, to the *Cité S. Pierre* — or the *Village des Jeunes* — where there’s a forest campus to accommodate more cheaply young people who’d want to visit and volunteer at the shrine. The attraction of our going out there was to make use of the natural outdoor arena known as the ‘Cathedral of the Trees,’ where one can have Mass on the great boulder of an altar, and the congregation nestles on the terraced woodland amongst the trees. For many on our diocesan pilgrimage it’s a real highlight, as long as the weather is kind: last year we had pouring rain, almost a disaster; this year the weather was ideal for such a shady spot, the dappled sunlight playing through the trees, and the temperature perfect. At one with nature, to listen

to and adore Jesus the Lord of all Creation, I was put in mind of the event in the Gospel today, where Jesus gathers on a hillside some 5000 of His followers, to teach them with His Word and to feed them with His miraculous Bread. I don’t think we quite had 5000 on Monday at the ‘Cathedral of the Trees,’ but maybe we had 500.

In this year (‘B’) of the lectionary, as you probably know, we hear mostly from the Gospel of *Mark* on the ordinary Sundays of the year ... but as *Mark* is the shortest Gospel it won’t quite stretch to the whole year. And so for 5 weeks in the summer of Year ‘B’ the Church gives us passages instead from the Gospel of *John*, from ch. 6, the great chapter on ‘the Bread of Life.’ It starts with the feeding of the 5000 — the verses we’ve heard today at the head of the chapter — followed by Our Lord’s lengthy and powerful teaching discourse. In *Mark*’s Gospel this feeding miracle is recounted as a stand-alone event; but *John* uses it as the thematic introduction to something much more profound, a miracle even greater — the feeding of Jesus’s whole people *sacramentally*, in due course.

Jn 6 for me is truly a wonderful chapter ... in fact, in many ways I think of it as the very heart of the Gospel of St John. If I had to retain *just one chapter* of the whole of the NT I've always imagined that I'd opt to keep this one! **Jn 6:** take a chance some time in these summer weeks to read this chapter again, privately and prayerfully. Maybe it will become for you, too, as it has become for me, a most precious text that speaks to your heart and soul.

The feeding of the great crowd of 5000 in the Gospel is a sign of the fact that *God feeds His people Himself*. God had fed the Hebrews fleeing from Egypt in the desert, with manna from heaven (that's next Sunday's first reading); He also fed the 100 people at the hand of Elisha (the 1st reading today); so likewise does Jesus do on the Galilee hillside above the Lake. But despite the magnificence of these miracles in both OT and NT, all of this is in fact just a foretaste, and glimpse, of God's ultimate intention with regard to the feeding of His people. Look at the *extravagance* of Jesus in the Gospel today, all those baskets-ful of scraps: God does not provide stingily,

with barely enough to go round; the evidence is that He gives generously, and in super-abundance. This is the truth of what we find He has done, *par excellence*, when we go on to consider the Mass. Because it's really the Mass that His feeding of the 5000 points towards, as Jn 6 will elaborate on, and which we shall consider as the coming weeks go by: it's what makes the Eucharist / the Holy Mass so centrally important to us as Catholics. It's why it is that as long as we are physically able, we must go to Mass to be truly "practising" Catholics — because here at Mass we encounter Christ who made it clear that He so wants to be with His people as to not just gather us to instruct us or command us, but lovingly to *feed* us ... once He did so with mere bread even if miraculously abundant, but now He does so with *Himself under the form of bread*. And anyway, this is not just feeding, but is tied intimately with His laying down His life in the Passion, and pouring our His Blood, so that in His resurrection, He might be *life-giving* food, *eternal-life-giving* food!

Over recent decades, the Popes have offered us any

number of magisterial teachings on the Eucharist: *Mediator Dei* (1947), Pope Pius XII; *Mysterium Fidei* (1965), Pope Paul VI; *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003), Pope John Paul II; *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2005), Pope Benedict XVI. These, some of them anyway, are lengthy documents, but the Popes' insistence on offering the Church reiterated teaching about the Eucharist expresses the centrality of the Mass and of Eucharistic Adoration. As Pope John Paul II states at the very outset of his own encyclical: "*The Church draws her life from the Eucharist.*" He goes on ...

[1. The Church draws her life from the Eucharist.] This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates *the heart of the mystery of the Church*. In a variety of ways she joyfully experiences the constant fulfilment of the promise: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (*Mt 28:20*), but in the Holy Eucharist, through the changing of bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord, she rejoices in this presence with unique intensity. Ever since Pentecost, when the Church, the People of the New Covenant, began her pilgrim journey towards her heavenly homeland, **the Divine Sacrament has continued to mark the passing of her days, filling them with confident hope.**

In these next 4 weeks, we'll try and spend some time

taking aspects of this teaching letter of Pope John Paul II to learn more about this central act of our faith, the Mass. It is important that we learn about the Mass, because unless we understand the Mass, where we meet Jesus most uniquely and intimately, how can we ever understand the rest of our faith? Everything else as Catholics radiates out from the Mass, from being here together at the altar; everything else comes back again to the Mass, so that we bring all we do back again to Christ; all we are, in other words, centres on the Mass.

Jesus's *teaching* of the people, as we heard in the Gospel, led to His *feeding* them — one followed on from the other, by His own intention — and they were so moved by this miraculous gesture that they acknowledged Him to be a prophet, and more than a prophet — in fact, the Messiah — and were stirred to glorify Him. We, too, then, desire above all things to hear Jesus and heed Him; and so we desire to be fed by Him, because that is what He Himself wishes, and His wish is eternally true and brings many blessings. Our insistence that the Sunday Mass is the

heart of the week, and the heart of our Christian life, then, is not some invented Catholic practice to keep us ‘at Church’ regularly. No, it’s a living-out of the very life that Jesus placed before us in His own ministry. We are lucky to have these spread-out weeks of contemplating the ‘Mystery of Faith,’ the ‘Bread of Life,’ which is Jesus’ greatest gift, because it is His self-gift. When our forebears in England, in the penal times of the 16th to 19th centuries, reiterated that maxim, “It’s the Mass that matters,” it wasn’t to downplay any of the rest of our spiritual and charitable duties as believing Catholics — the panoply of blessed ways in which we truly can “love God and love our neighbour” — but simply to put into words the fact that Jesus in the Mass is there by His own gracious design, and we receive Him from His very hands. Thank God for this great mystery, this great Sacrament, this perfect offering of the sacrifice of Jesus, and the spiritual feeding in Holy Communion that gives us such intimate union with the Son of God. And thank God for the Sundays of this summer, when at length through the

lectionary (Jn 6) we can be reminded of the Eucharist in a deep way, and that “It’s the Mass that matters” — we can give ourselves as entirely as humanly possible to Jesus who gives Himself entirely to us.

*The eyes of all creatures look to You, O Lord,
and You give them their food in due time.
You open wide Your hand,
grant the desires of all who live. (Ps 144)*