

18th Sunday of Ordinary Time Homily

*I am
the Bread
of Life*

John 6:35



I don't know how many of you have done some teaching, but there are definite pro's and con's. On Tuesday nights at the Education Centre down in Lancaster I used to be part of the team teaching teachers, students and qualified, and others, the Catholic Certificate. Tuesday evening after a day's teaching or studying was not the best time, but there it was. I was probably not the best of teachers myself, but used to give it my all, hoping that some of those undoubted gems of wisdom would land on fertile ground, which is the teacher's perennial hope. I don't know if you have done any teaching but if you have spent half an hour say, explaining something, very clearly you think, and then ask for questions. And then a hand goes up and asks something which shows they have understood nothing of what you have said, it is rather disappointing. (I used to wonder sometimes whether they did it deliberately to show they hated being there.) I did not leave exactly crushed, but sort of dispirited much of the time, and vowed never to try teaching teachers again.

Jesus is a teacher. (But a more patient one.) Sometimes as in the gospel today and with Mary Magdalene, he is called Rabbi or rabbuni, teacher. The week before last we had a good example of him teaching the crowd. Also right at the beginning of Matthew's gospel he sits them down and teaches them what we call the Beatitudes on how to live.

Today he is trying to get across something more complicated. He is not giving practical guidance on how to live our lives. What he is trying to get across is, "I am trying to propose to you a new understanding, a new vision, of what 'life' means," and it is not going down well. Look at the crowd's response.

First off they ask him 'when he arrived.' Which is not a bad question in itself, but really has nothing to do with what Jesus is trying to get across. So he ignores that because he knows what is behind the question, they want to see another miracle, but miracles are not for entertainment they alert us, prepare us for Jesus' message. His point, in the incredible miracle of the feeding of the 5000, was to begin explaining to them that the 'life' he is offering is beyond the ordinary rules of this world. The bread he gave them lasted for an evening, the message he is preaching is for life. Food that can last.

All through this gospel the people are going to mistake what he is trying to say. They want another sign, or are talking about work, or Moses and manna. And

this is a common method of the writer in John's gospel, to teach us by showing us the mistakes, the misunderstandings, of those around Jesus, so we can see the truth more clearly.

So what is Jesus trying to say? Clearly the significant line is 'I am the bread of life.' Perhaps it would have been easier for them and us to grasp if he had said, 'I am the breath of life.' But what was the significance of bread? It is famously the staff of life, which from the Old Testament means the breads that supports us, holds us up (as in the name of one of our local bakeries.) Bread was the staple of life. And for us perhaps 'breathing' means more as we have so much food we can even waste it, but we know we cannot live without breath, oxygen.. The point is that what Jesus is getting across is what is essential for 'life', but not just this life on earth that we experience on a daily basis until we die, but a new idea of LIFE.

What Jesus is saying is that this life here is only a part of 'life.' There is a far broader, more encompassing, more real even, life for us to know of which this daily life is one simple aspect. It is the life that is in touch with divine life, with the whole of creation, that is without time or space, because it is beyond that, and yet includes it. It is a life that understands that we experience pain and suffering here on earth, but that is only a small part of this wider life and our experience of it here on earth is part of our growing into true knowledge of the life which is in fact God's life and gift to us.

When Christ, the Son of God, takes on our life at the incarnation at his birth here on earth, and yet continues to be part of God's boundless, divine life too, he is trying to show us that the incarnation that we have here on earth (my life as you can see me), is just an introduction to the wider life with God and all creation that he holds out for us.

So just like when I was trying to teach the teachers, I hope I am making some sense. Quite possibly not.

It is moving from our earthly complaints and world view, like the Israelites in the Old Testament in our first reading, (though their need for food was a serious worry), but it is broadening our vision of life to God's vision of life.

How do we sustain this new life we are invited to understand and to live? That is the question Jesus is wanting them to ask. And it is a big ask to be fair. And the answer is himself, in all the many ways he makes his life available to us; love; the Eucharist, the scriptures.

One of the pro's of teaching is when you see the penny drop. Not often in my classes. But at the end of this chapter we will see Jesus' joy in Peter's response.