

Homily: 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

Just imagine for a moment that there was no God. Our incredible universe, our beautiful planet, the people you know, even your own life – it would all just be an accident, a product of an unbelievable sequence of random chances. We would be truly mortal; once our life on this earth ended, we would disappear into oblivion; and, of course, our loved ones who have died would be gone forever. Life itself would lose so much of its meaning. There would be no one watching over us, and no one to turn to when we faced problems that human beings can't solve. When I imagine this, firstly I thank God for the gift of faith: so many people live without this beautiful awareness that the Lord is real. I also think how impossible it would be to believe that everything I see, everything I know, even everything I am, was just a product of chance. It seems extraordinary to me that some people actually believe this! And yet perhaps their belief that there is no God is sometimes shaky. It's striking that even professed atheists occasionally feel an urge to turn to some higher power when things become impossible; they perhaps plead with God in prayer, just on the off chance that they might have got it wrong.

That's because, in times of crisis, we need someone to turn to – someone who can help us. And if we didn't believe in God, where would we go? This is Peter's question: "Lord, to whom would we go?" – other than to You – "You have the message of eternal life". But Peter's question isn't born out of desperation. For him, leaving Jesus is not just cutting ourselves off from the power that can help us when life is hard. For Peter, leaving Jesus would be like running away from home – in the end, we will always feel an urge to come back, because there's nowhere else to go. Peter has made his home with Jesus: he knows that Jesus alone has the words which are spirit and life, the message of eternal life which gives meaning each day, not just in times of crisis.

Peter's profession of faith comes in response to Jesus' question: "What about you: do you want to go away too?" The Twelve have already watched as many of the other followers of Jesus have indeed left Him. They have listened to Jesus teaching them about the Eucharist, about eating His Flesh and drinking His Blood, and they say that His words are impossible to accept. So they walk away, even though they really have nowhere to go. These are the same people who were present when Jesus fed the 5000. I wonder if they would have come back to Jesus next time they needed a miracle. Perhaps, like so many people through the ages, they would turn to Him in a time of crisis.

But Jesus wants to be more to us than a miracle-worker or a divine problem solver. He wants to share His very life with us. He speaks to us words of spirit and life, and He calls us into relationship with Him. Some people reject that, either because they cannot accept His teaching, or simply because they drift away; but in either case, they don't really have anywhere to go – they are simply leaving Jesus, without a clear sense of anything else to hold onto. We're told today that many of the followers of Jesus left Him and "stopped going with Him" – literally, stopped "*walking* with Him". It's as though He journeys on, and they are left behind, without anywhere to go, with aimless lives.

We, on the other hand, do have an aim in life. We are called to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and to find in Him our direction, our purpose, our goal. We do not simply turn to Him when life is tough, but we try to walk with Him day by day, following where He leads and placing our trust in Him. In today's second reading, St Paul speaks of the relationship of marriage as being like the relationship between Christ and His people. In hearing this reading we perhaps focus all our attention on the things we find difficult, especially what Paul says about wives obeying their husbands. This requires careful interpretation. And it shouldn't blind us to everything else that Paul teaches in that reading. Great demands are made on husbands too: that they should love their wives as Christ loves the Church – in other words, to the point of sacrificing their very lives for their wives, and loving them as they love their own bodies. The point of all that Paul says is that the marriage covenant mirrors the covenant of love between Christ and the Church, between God and His people.

Today's Gospel comes at the end of the 'Bread of Life' discourse in John 6. Jesus has given a lengthy teaching on the Eucharist, and at the end of it, a decision must be made by His listeners: will they accept His teaching, or will they drift away and no longer walk with Him? In a sense, we are faced with a similar choice at every Mass. Today, and at each Mass, we meet Jesus, the Bread of Life, who comes to us and calls us to Him. In this celebration the marriage covenant between Christ and his Church is renewed: the covenant which is sealed by His Blood shed on the cross, the great act of His love for His Bride. And we can say "Amen" – yes – to this covenant. But to say yes means not only to be here, but to walk with Jesus during the week, to be His followers in our daily lives. It means not turning to Him only when life is hard, but trying to stay close to Him in each moment. It means accepting His Word, even when it is difficult for us, as a Word of spirit and life. If we want our lives to have meaning, there really is no one else to go to. He alone has the message of eternal life; like Peter, we believe and we know that He is the Holy One of God.

Fr Andrew

