

18TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

a sermon preached by Fr. John-Francis Friendship SCP
at S. Andrew's Church, Romford
Sunday, July 31st, 2011

Isaiah 55: 1-5, Roms. 9: 1-5 and Matt.14: 13-21

INTRODUCTION

Last week, as many of you know, I made my annual Retreat. This year I went down to Kent and stayed with the Sisters of St. Andrew in Edenbridge where my guide was Suzanne... It really felt home-from-home! Five days of silence having nothing else to do except rest, relax and seek to respond to the promptings of God within the heart.

As *our* Suzanne and I have said before – time spent each year in focussing into our relationship with God in whatever way is appropriate – in retreat away from home or by setting aside time for prayer and rest at home – is an invaluable part to growing in our divine humanity. And it can take many themes. I was looking at the website for St. Beuno's – the Retreat Centre made famous last year through the BBC TV series, *The Big Silence*, - and noted the variety of themed Retreats they offer – Gardening, Nature, Food (not specifically chocolate!), Young Adults, Film, Night Sky and so on. They also have one for Beginners.

But the one element common to them all is the withdrawal from distraction that one might open the heart more fully to God. As someone has written: *'It is rare these days to have opportunities to retreat out of the noise and busyness of life and enter into a place of silence. And yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we know in the depths of our being, our souls thirst for this silence where God speaks to our hearts. This universal human thirst for union with God is actually a response to God's initial thirst for our love.'* (Website of the Sisters of Life)

So we might recall those words of the prophet Isaiah:

*Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters.*

*... Why spend money for that which is not bread
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?*

THE SOULS DESIRE FOR GOD

Two of our readings this morning deal with those deeper desires. Isaiah's words were addressed to a people who were living in exile in modern day Iraq. Oppressed and marginalised, the writer appeals to them using the imagery of a free banquet to stir up their desire to be in a right relationship with God. Get your relationship with God right, he is saying, and all other relationships will fall into place. God summons the thirsty and hungry that they may have life.

So ask yourself the question, *Why am I here this morning? Why have I come to Mass?* See if there's not, deep within you, a yearning for ... something that will fulfil your deepest desires. Just like the prophesy of Isaiah, or the story of the feeding of the 5000 we heard of in our gospel reading, beneath whatever might have brought us here this morning lies a deeper meaning.

THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

Then, in that reading from Matthew's gospel, Jesus shows compassion to the multitude who come to him and provides them with the food they need. Now it's important to remember that whatever *our* need might be, we have a responsibility to show compassion to others. *Love ought to show itself in deeds over and above words.* (*Contemplation to Attain the Love of God – St. Ignatius*). The plight of the victims of famine in Somalia cries out to us to show compassion through donating money. Sharing what we have with those who have so little. Yet we know that material prosperity alone cannot satisfy our deeper hunger.

HUNGRY AND THIRSTY FOR LIFE

As I reflected on our gospel reading I noted, firstly, that this feeding comes after we are told that Jesus had retreated to a boat in order to find a place of solitude. It's clear from the gospels that Jesus recognised the need for solitude and often found places in his daily life where this was possible. It didn't need to be a Retreat House – even a boat would do! We don't know how he used the time, what he did or how he prayed. But he recognised the need to spend time apart with God.

The second thing that struck me was that whilst the writer tells us that Jesus had compassion for the crowds, feeding their bodies doesn't seem to be a priority and we need to consider that the writer had other matters in mind. For a start, the five loaves enabled people to experience community. The people gathered in that 'deserted place' shared a meal together, no doubt talked to each other and began to make connections. Eating together is one of the ways in which we create a sense of community. And not just with our friends. Sharing a meal with those you don't know – getting to know the stranger in your midst. Taking a cake to a new neighbour – even coming to a parish Dance, or to our Social Club – is a way of building our community.

So, "*Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.*" And they were nourished. This is an echo of the Eucharist when Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave himself, his own body and blood, for the life of the world. Our needs are not only material and emotional. There is a deeper, spiritual need within us that needs satisfying.

CONCLUSION

People have always aspired to a better life. At present our western world seems rich beyond the wildest dreams of the world's poor. Yet our – comparatively – lavish life-style is fragile and the cost of living is, literally, too high for some. Just look at Amy Winehouse ... So, is that what life's all about? More 'stuff'?

In a book entitled, '*The Thirst for Wholeness: Attachment, Addiction and the Spiritual Quest*', the writer said: 'Early in my recovery from alcoholism, I came across part of a letter from the Swiss psychiatrist Jung to Bill Wilson, cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Referring to one of his former patients, Jung wrote, "His craving for alcohol was the equivalent on a low level of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God." As I read on, I realized that Jung was describing something that I know well. I have felt a non-specific craving for most of my life. Many of us do. A trip to the shopping mall, a piece of cake, a cuddle: none of these momentary solutions quenches the deep thirst. And we frequently feel a pervasive restlessness, a desire for something more. Many people identify the spiritual yearning as a persistent voice in their lives, one they often confuse with their everyday aspirations. Our innate

longing to rediscover our spiritual nature is an often unconscious driving force that many of us feel throughout our lives'. (Christina Groff: Harper Collins. 1993)

There's a wonderful prayer of St. Ignatius Loyola, whose Feast Day falls today, which expresses this deep longing which I want to leave you with:

*Jesus, may all that is you flow into me.
May your body and blood be my food and drink.
May your passion and death be my strength and life.
Jesus, with you by my side, enough has been given.
May the shelter I seek be the shadow of your cross.
Let me not run from the love which you offer,
But hold me safe from the forces of evil.
On each of my dyings shed your light and your love.
Keep calling to me until that day comes,
When, with your saints, I may praise you for ever.*

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters.