17th Sunday in O. T. 2021

The most easily recognised landmark in Rome is Michelangelo’s great dome of St Peter’s Basilica. Visitors to St Peter’s, at least before Covid 19, could climb to the very top of the dome, which is almost four hundred and fifty feet high. The ascent is by a narrow staircase, of three hundred and twenty steps, that spirals around the inside of the dome. It is not a climb for the faint hearted! I recall doing it forty years ago when age permitted and joints were willing! On the way up, there are a number of small slit-like windows which allow for a very limited view of the city beneath. However, when the top is reached, the stout-hearted are rewarded with one of the most magnificent and breath-taking views of Rome.

Beginning today, and for the next four Sundays, the Gospel for our Sunday Masses is taken from chapter six of St. John's Gospel. The teachings of Jesus, as presented by St. John, can be compared to that staircase spiralling up the dome of St Peter’s Basilica, with small windows here and there which allow us to catch a glimpse of where Jesus is taking us; until finally we see clearly the wonder that he is revealing.

Today’s Gospel passage enables us to take the first four steps on this ascent. The first step is when we are told that it is just before the Passover and Jesus is on a hillside surrounded by his disciples and a large expectant crowd. The word “Passover” is the window through which we catch a glimpse of what is happening. At each Passover the Jews recall how, under the leadership of Moses, they escaped from slavery in Egypt. Jesus has begun to reveal to the crowd who he is; he does it by paralleling himself with Moses, their great leader. The crowd, who would be well acquainted with their history, are alert to the signals, and so, full of expectation, they begin to wonder if Jesus is the new liberator – but as yet, they do not see the whole picture. St John, the author the Gospel, wants us to focus our attention on that window of Passover, keeping in mind one particular Passover, that at which the Last Supper took place. This is where Jesus is leading us.

The Gospel takes a second step forward when Jesus asks Philip, *“Where can we buy some bread for these people to eat?”* Philip, and the other disciples, would have immediately recognised this as a reference to a particular conversation which took place between God and Moses when the people were stranded in the desert, without food. God promised food, but Moses doubted if enough could be found to feed everyone. God said: *“You shall see if the promise I have made to you comes true or not”* *(Nb.11:22)*. We are expected to sense the anticipation of Philip and the others, “What is Jesus going to do?”, when Andrew brings to the attention of Jesus *“a small boy with five barley loaves and two fish”.* As the huge crowd sits down, those around Jesus would automatically have recalled the event of Elisha the Prophet feeding one hundred men with twenty barley loaves; the account of which we heard in our first reading. That episode with Elisha is the window through which we see what Jesus will do with the five barley loaves and two fish

Now comes our third step: Jesus took *“the loaves, gave thanks, and gave them out...he then did the same with the fish, giving out as much as was wanted.”* On that day, the crowd saw that the loaves and fishes just kept multiplying in the hands of Jesus and they recognised the great prophet promised by Moses. It was only after the resurrection that it would dawn on the disciples what Jesus had done; he had foreshadowed what he would do at the Last Supper and that which is done in memory of him in every Mass. The Gospel’s description of the event – *“he took, give thanks”*, and shared out - is the window through which we can recognise the promise of the Eucharist. Now the question is not “What will he do?”, but “Who is he?”

By the fourth step we see the crowd, convinced than that Jesus *“really is the prophet who is to come into the world.”* But they look at Jesus through the small window of their own narrow political expectations; they had decided that Jesus, like Moses, would free them from slavery and from Roman domination. Their mistaken interpretation represents worldly thinking, whereas Jesus is revealing something which only faith can comprehend.

This episode, on that hillside in Galilee, begins with the recognition of physical hunger; but Jesus points to a more intense hunger still, a hunger for meaning and purpose, a hunger for love, a hunger for God. This spiritual hunger Jesus wants to satisfy, and gradually he leads us to see that he alone can satisfy it.

*“See, Lord, our distress:*

*We have eaten the bitter bread of our illusions*

*without being satisfied.*

*But now we seek only your Word,*

*Jesus Christ, the bread of eternal life.”*

**Amen.**