

HOMILY 18th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2021
AND NOW FOR FAITH IN THE BREAD OF LIFE
Jn 6.24-35 Exodus 16.2-4, 12-15 Eph 4.17, 20-24

It's welcome back again, after our 5th hard lockdown, and perhaps one of the greatest difficulties is the uncertainty of what comes next. The main certainty is that we get vaccinated as soon as possible, for our own sake and the sake of others, especially the health-compromised in our community. Meanwhile, painful as it is, we need to continue to take the necessary precautions of social distancing and observing the ongoing restrictions.

I have suggested earlier that our deprivation of regular Eucharist has perhaps increased our appreciation of receiving Communion as a community on a regular basis. In a sense, it has been easier for me, as I've continued to say 3 weekday Masses and one for every weekend we have been locked down, but naturally, it's just not the same without a responsive community physically, and I prefer not just to be a one man band, except when there's no real alternative!

Well, today was one of great celebration, with my close friend and contemporary in the priesthood, Martin Ashe of Killarney, ordained as a bishop, along with Anthony Ireland (who is not Irish!), at St Patrick's Cathedral this Saturday morning, the last day of July. Many of you would know from his time here, staying with Bill Attard, my predecessor and also good friend. Bill was also present, fit, well and happy, sending his greetings to all of his friends here at Essendon. Unfortunately, only 100 could be in attendance but his mother and 9 siblings and their families watching at around midnight, from Ireland, on livestream.

Martin has been a Melbourne priest for 43 years now, and his new role is a fitting tribute to his commitment to ministry and pastoral care in many areas over that time. He has no pretensions whatsoever (he had trouble putting on his new episcopal hat, or mitre, straight, especially with the backflaps!), and humbly accepted whatever diverse appointments he has been given over the years, most recently for 9 years as parish priest of the newest parish in Melbourne, based in the growth corridors around Mernda, now with 3 expanding Catholic primary schools. Likewise, Tony (whom I once taught Canon Law), has been a committed pastor in many parishes over his 30 or so years as a priest. We wish them every blessing and good health and happiness in their new roles, working with the People of God in their regions. Meanwhile, our local bishop, Terry Curtain faithfully continues on in Moonee Ponds, in our zone.

Last weekend, we heard John's Gospel recounting the feeding of the masses, by Jesus, who acknowledges the fundamental human need for physical sustenance, at a time when they were hungry, thirsty and tired. Now we move to a deeper symbolic level, where he challenges them to recognize the need for spiritual nourishment as well. While many seem to be interested in more signs and wonders from Jesus, he tries to get them to see meaning in his message of God's Word being active through his teaching, and to have faith in him as the one sent by the Father to enlighten the eyes of their minds.

Jesus concludes with presenting himself as the *Bread of Life*, obviously prefiguring Eucharist as the spiritual sustenance for those who have faith in him and who take his message to heart as they follow him along their paths of life, as is the same for you and me now, as we gather to hear the Word and break and share the Bread of Life, which we give thanks as we receive the Eucharist as Bread for the Broken, not for the pure and the perfect, who do not exist, except perhaps in the deluded minds of those who think they are! As Pope Francis puts it, we are to come forward to accept it in faith, as spiritual *medicine for the soul*.

And so Jesus moves forward in his teaching, from the Father providing the manna for the People of Israel. From hungry, thirsty, frustrated, disillusioned and lost exiles in the desert, as we hear in today's reading from Exodus, they find their faith again, in their God guiding them unknowingly.

Jesus then emphasizes the need for spiritual sustenance, as we receive the Eucharist, from the time of that exciting and memorable occasion of our First Communion, a critical and joyful moment in our Catholic experience and tradition, of initiation and growth in faith and Christian life. But, of course, it's up to us to continue that growth, as we follow him in faith, and lead the way by example.

We also hear Paul telling the people of the early Ephesus faith community to not lead aimless lives, but to look beyond their own selfish selves and to find meaning in their lives through taking to heart the goodness and truth of the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus. As it also applies to us, we are challenged to be spiritually sustained by receiving Eucharist, accepting his Real Presence as the Bread of Life, nourishment for our souls.

john hannon

1st August 2021