

Homily for 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2011

The phone hacking scandal in the UK is all in the news. It is prompting a lot of investigation and soul searching in the media industry and in political circles. People in both the media and politics all too often it seems are seduced by their own power so that ethical and moral considerations get lost. It is nothing new. Each of us can easily be misled by our own desires and ambitions, good as they might be, to use other people to our own advantage.

In listening to the debates about refugees coming to our shores one could get the impression that we are talking about people like you and me who simply front up to Canberra and demand a better deal. National policies on such things are not always able to see the human face of the individual refugee and the ongoing tragedy of his or her life. All that becomes lost in the political debate. Fear makes us want to keep the stranger at a distance so we do not see their eyes. Then the ongoing tragedy of the child abuse reports in Ireland reminds that the Church is not immune from the abuse of power which can be so seductive.

St Matthew tells us that on hearing of John the Baptist's death he withdrew to a deserted place by himself. The unspoken reality behind those few words seems to be that Jesus needed to grieve for John. After all John was his cousin. They probably grew up together as children. They both shared a passion for the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They both in different ways were at home in deserted places where they could pray. In the end they both suffered a martyr's death. Yes, the news must have affected Jesus deeply and it did force the urgency of his own ministry.

John was beheaded at a banquet given by Herod, the king. It is described in the preceding paragraph of Matthew's Gospel. It was an act carried out because of a frivolous drunken oath Herod made to the daughter of Herodias. He, powerful as he was, then could not lose face in front of his guests. One could hardly imagine a more unjust and despicable act by which he showed his contempt for both John and the ordinary people who looked to John as a prophet. Jesus' time for private grieving was not to be. The crowds followed him. They, too, would know of John's fate. He responded to their need. They needed reassurance that the world was not totally against them. That reassurance Jesus could provide.

So there could not be a more stark contrast between the rich banquet that Herod gave and the one that Jesus now gives. Not in a palace surrounded by wealth. But in the wilderness. He was empty handed yet ensured the people were made hospitable and welcome. He was not concerned to fawn before important guests as Herod did. Because all Jesus does is not about himself. What he does is always about the other, particularly the powerless and needy.

The disciples are naturally concerned about Jesus and want to send everyone away. The people are not Jesus' responsibility they think They are capable of looking after themselves. But Jesus is looking to a need in them much deeper than simply providing food. His command to his friends is, "There is no need to send them away. You give them something to eat." The disciples have very little, just five loaves and two fish. No sumptuous feast as at Herod's table here. No servants to wait upon Jesus or themselves. Rather, the disciples are to be the servants of the large crowd who want to be near Jesus.

There is an important reversal of values going on in this event. It is a great turning point not only for Jesus but for the disciples. The importance of this story of the feeding of the crowd in the wilderness is shown by the fact that it is told five times in the four Gospels. This is more than any other episode in all the Gospels. The event was remembered vividly.

Jesus power is not so much seen even in the miraculous feeding on this occasion. The great crowd would have been oblivious of what happened. Only the disciples knew. His power comes from being a servant not to be served. He then tells in no uncertain terms that this is how it should be for his disciples. This kind of power is revealed most tellingly on the Cross of Calvary.

This shared meal in the wilderness hosted by Jesus and the disciples then is the foundation of the

Eucharist. This meal in the wilderness is the human reality of what became the ritual of the Eucharist at Mass. The words he uses have clear Eucharistic overtones that are spelt out at the Last Supper. That Supper, and every Eucharist since, is a banquet that prophesies God's coming reign on earth as in heaven. This is a kingdom, a reign, that does not depend on using people to build the rulers power but in serving lifts us up to share the divine life. Sharing in that divine life is the need which only Jesus can fulfil.

There were 12 baskets of leftovers. God always gives more than we ask for. God always gives what we really need. That is the promise of the Eucharist. Come to the water all you who are thirsty." It moves us to repentance.