

Homily for the Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

(26/07/09)

The story of the feeding of the five thousand can be read on all sorts of different levels, and it is worth reading slowly and carefully. There are lots of little details that we tend to miss because they are overshadowed by the big event - all that bread and fish. Today I want to think about where the loaves and the fish come from. Jesus knows what he is going to do, but he asks Philip where they could buy food for all the people. It was never his intention in fact to buy food, because there is food, albeit not very much of it, which is given to him by the boy. Jesus sets up a contrast between food that is bought and food that is given, and there is something rather important in this. We treat things we have bought very differently to the way we treat things we have been given. I could go out and buy myself a bag of flapjacks or a large chocolate cake, and I would probably enjoy eating them (if my children didn't get to them first). If I were given them by someone, they might well taste just the same, but somehow they would be different. When I receive a gift, I actually receive much more than the physical thing itself; when I buy something, all I get is the item I have paid for.

There is something rather mysterious in all of this, because any particular item might be a gift, or it might be a commodity. The item remains the same, but something about it changes. I quite often look in the windows of the antique shops here in Petworth, and among all the other things I often see what are clearly religious statues. At some time, clearly they were made for a church or for someone's home as aids to worship, to help people focus on prayer. Possibly a statue remained in a church for centuries, loved and cared for by the worshippers. As far as they were concerned it had no real value, because they had received it as a gift from previous generations. Then, one day, for whatever reason, it came to be sold, and in that moment its whole nature changed. A statue in a church where it has been for two hundred years is a very different thing from a statue in a shop with a price tag. Once in the shop it may as well be a vase or a lamp or a brass candlestick. Once it is bought it retains its monetary value, of course, as a commodity, but

it will not ever become once more what it was intended to be - unless someone puts it back into a church where it becomes a permanent fixture once again, and becomes once more a gift given to each succeeding generation. A gift feels very different from a commodity, even if the same item can at one time be one, and at another time the other.

This is not just me waffling on about some sort of idle hobbyhorse that happens to interest me. Today is the day set apart by our bishops to be celebrated as a 'Day for Life' and this year they want us to think about suicide. Suicide rates in this country are not particularly high, but it is still the major cause of death in men under the age of 35, and when it does touch a family its effects are devastating. The Church continues to tell us that suicide is bad - clearly it is not a part of the world as God designed it; but that is not to say we must turn our backs on people who have taken this tragic, desperate step. It is quite impossible for us to put ourselves into the position of people who are tempted to end their lives. The instinct to live is incredibly strong, so the depths of despair that one must reach to think of such a thing are hard to imagine. It is seldom the case that people want to die, but it seems this is the only way of making the pain (that is the mental anguish, the despair) go away. A young woman whose story is told on the Day for Life website wrote this:

"One day I felt I could no longer stand the pain, I needed release from its' grip and dying, I felt was my only way out. I had to do it, I knew the devastation I would leave behind but I was in so much pain, I didn't care."

It can sometimes feel that the terrible sadness is so painful, that anything is preferable.

In considering what is a really serious social issue, it would be a good idea for us to turn our attention away from the individuals, and look for a while at the society in which we live. Why is it that people find life so desperate? How have we failed people so badly? In the Catholic Herald there is an interview with a De La Salle Brother who counsels young people, and he mentions an 18 year old who left a note saying 'You gave me everything that I wanted but nothing that I needed'. It is one of the great tragedies of our world that

we have turned everything into a commodity with a value that can be traded. Even life itself is now a commodity, and people feel they can make judgements about its value. The moment that people no longer see life as a gift to be treasured, but as a commodity to be weighed up and valued against other commodities, it is inevitable that people will see their own lives in a totally different way. There has been a great deal of talk again about assisted suicide recently, following the suicides of Sir Edward and Lady Downes in Switzerland; only this week the RCN decided that it would no longer oppose assisted suicide. This is deeply irresponsible. The government has, for some years, been promoting a suicide reduction strategy that tries to reduce the number of suicides, and here are medical professionals saying not only that they are neutral about suicide, but they don't oppose health professionals killing their patients. Our young people are not stupid. They are perfectly able to say, why should suicide be ok for old people but not for young people? The instant that life ceases to be viewed as a gift, and is seen as something relative, something that can be traded (I will swop my life for death) we open up a huge black hole that will swallow people in increasing numbers: when people are saying 'My life my not be worth living' we ought to be saying to them 'what can we do to make it worth living'. We should not be saying 'Maybe you are right'.

Suicide is a terrible thing; it may solve the problem for one person, but it can wreck the lives of others. By and large, we cannot blame the people who are so desperate that they can no longer see this. What we have to ask is, what on earth can we do to make the society we live in a place where fewer and fewer people are driven to such desperation? Can our fractured, fragmented society where every one is on their own, struggling to keep up with the rest, a world where people are valued for what they have or for what they can do, rather than simply by virtue of being human - can such a society be redeemed? Is it just possible that there is something in the Catholic vision of culture and community that might help make the world a place where everyone feels more at home?