

18TH SUNDAY of the YEAR, A

Here in this passage of today's Gospel we have probably the best known of Jesus' miracles, the feeding of the five thousand. You have probably heard someone preach on it a hundred times, so I am going to ignore it and just focus on the first two sentences instead.

For in the first two sentences we see a few things of the life of Jesus. We see first of all the humanity of Jesus in his response to the death of John the Baptist, which is summed up by that very simple line: "he withdrew to by boat to a lonely place where they could be by themselves".

How much of the personal anguish and sorrow of Jesus is hidden between these lines? Not only was John his cousin and family member, he was his forerunner who had prepared the way for him in preaching the Kingdom of God. And how natural it appears for Jesus to retire to some lonely place; not just because he was tired, which he surely was, but to take it all in; to absorb the full significance of the death of St John who had spent himself entirely in the service of God and had given up his life for Jesus. Most of us have probably never had the experience of someone giving up their life for us; but for those who have (read about it in newspapers etc), it usually has a profound effect upon their lives. They become more aware of how precarious life can be and all the more grateful for it; more determined to live a life worthy of God and of the person who saved them.

It becomes more apparent, then, why Jesus steps up a gear and produces his greatest miracle to date, in spite of his tiredness. He is spurred on by the witness of John the Baptist to teach and work wonders with tireless effort.

2. Another lesson

But there is another lesson here for us in Jesus' response to St John's death, and that is the way he copes with his death. As we know, Jesus wept for the death of his friend Lazarus and he retires to a lonely place in this passage to mourn the death of St John. He shows us that it is perfectly natural for us to mourn for the loss of our loved ones and to pray for them in the silence of our own hearts. He understands the anguish we feel at the death of a loved one and the isolation that it brings; the feeling that no one understands what we are going through because as much as they might have experienced the death of someone close to them, they do not know what it is like to lose *this* particular person in my life; the fact that I will never see *this* person again. It is an awful heartache which can last for many years after the death of someone we have loved so much and our lives can become reinterpreted through the prism of that anguish.

So in the life of Jesus we see that he did experience that very same heartache and remembers it eternally in the glory of heaven in his wounded heart and so is especially close to us when we have the misfortune of the death of someone we love.

And yet, there is another side to the example of Christ which affords us great hope. For as much as the Lord may have agonized internally over the death of his cousin, the responsibilities of real life impress themselves upon him. The crowds are

relentless in their desire to hear his words of wisdom and to receive his healing touch. They have little awareness of his heartache and his need to be alone, yet he does not turn them away. He allows love and compassion for others to drive him onwards in his mission and to put the needs of His Father and the needs of others before His own.

But sometimes the opposite can be true for us. Sometimes there is a danger that in our heartache and anguish at the death of a loved one we become too self-absorbed, too introspective. Our loss, which feels all-consuming in its bitterness, begins to affect not only our lives but the lives of those around us. We shut other people out and stop to function properly because the daily concerns of life appear trivial and superficial in comparison to our pain.

Perhaps the example of Jesus in today's Gospel is to say to us that when we feel down and crushed by the experience of death we ought to rest assured that Jesus understands our pain and suffering and is closer to us than ever, but also that he wants us to keep going; to allow the real world and the needs of others to spur us on to something even greater: the union with him in our sufferings, so that our sufferings can be transformed through his grace into the source of an even deeper communion with the Lord and compassion for others. It is no mere happenstance that Jesus' greatest miracle is performed just after such an agonizing human experience.