

THE BREAD OF LIFE

I'm happy to be with you this weekend. I thank Canon Michael, Fr. Paul and all of you for your warm welcome and for all you do in Alderney to witness to the Catholic Faith. It's 3 years since I was appointed Bishop of Portsmouth by the Holy Father. I ask your prayers. Originally I come from Altrincham near Manchester: this is what up north we'd call the "deep south"! I didn't know Portsmouth before, and since becoming bishop I've had to learn a lot of nautical terms about ships and the navy. Portsmouth Cathedral, if you've ever been, is in the city-centre. It's dedicated to St. John the Evangelist and outside it is an impressive statue, a sculpture by Philip Jackson, of St. John preaching the Gospel.

Now over the next Sundays at Mass we'll hear extracts from/ St. John's Gospel, Chapter 6. This chapter is called the Eucharistic Discourse, because after feeding the 5000, Jesus speaks of hunger and thirst, not for bodily food but spiritual. Just as God fed the people Israel in the desert with manna, as we heard in 1stR, so now the Father sends His Son to feed us with spiritual food. Jesus is that heavenly Food, the Bread from heaven. In the Mass, He feeds us with His flesh and blood so that, united with Him, we may receive here and now the grace to rise with Him to live forever. *Anyone who eats this bread will live forever, for the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world.* This is profound teaching. People laughed and walked away. Like today, many ignore it; they're too busy; they're indifferent. But Jesus' teaching is crystal clear. He is the Food that satisfies the human spirit. He helps us to find Him in the Church and the Scriptures. Above all, He invites us to feed on Him in the Mass, the Blessed Sacrament. This is our topic these next weeks: spiritual hunger and spiritual food.

In Portsmouth, one of the things I like doing in the evening is going out for a walk to say the Rosary. Since being a child, I've always loved the night sky, looking at the stars. But in the city, the traffic, the streetlights, the shops are so bright, you can barely see the Moon, let alone any stars. Spiritually, our secular culture is a bit like that, full of great potential, wonderful things; it makes life busy, absorbing, bright. But like the city lights, it easily obscures the sacred canopy of God, heaven, the angels and saints. Today few people are church-goers and the recent National Census found 25% of people to be 'nones': i.e. they believe in nothing. With so many in society spiritually adrift, is it any wonder moral relativism is on the increase, leading in turn to nihilism, to social pathologies and to breakdown in family relationships?

*The human heart is restless until it rests in God,* said St. Augustine. As Catholics, we need to proclaim this truth clearly and convincingly. The secularism of contemporary culture is a huge challenge to humanity's future, which is why we need to spread the Gospel by holiness of life, by attractive presentations and by personal contact. Since becoming bishop, I've been urging all our priests and people to focus energy on the new evangelisation, especially of the poor and needy. Human beings are a deep mystery, yet we're all hard-wired for friendship with God. We need a purpose in life and a moral compass. We need that salvation from sin, suffering and death that Jesus came to offer us. So keep the faith, nourish your faith, and live your faith. In this Mass, let's ask God to give us this day our daily Bread, Jesus Christ, to give us that Bread always, and to give that Bread through us to those we meet.