

*'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.'* (Jn 6.68) Have you ever marveled at this insightful saying of St Peter? Would you have been able to utter the same if you were one of the five thousand being fed by Jesus with five loaves and two fish? You might have replied, when Jesus asked, *'Do you also wish to go away?'* *Where can we go?* But that is not the same as Peter's answer. He does not say where but to whom! Eternal life is not a place we can go to. Don't we remember another memorable saying of Jesus: *'I'm the way, the truth and the life, no-one comes to the Father but through me.'* Eternal life is a gift of relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ.

In order to find out why St. Peter can respond to Jesus' question with tremendous insight, I like to draw our attention to another incident which involves him and Jesus as recorded in Luke 5.1-12. Another famous incident. Jesus stepped on to Peter's fishing boat and began teaching the crowd by the lakeside of Galilee. After sending the crowd away, he told Peter to take the boat to the deep and cast the net. At first Peter was reluctant and told Jesus that they had been toiling the whole night without any success. But he was willing to give another try. This time they could hardly pull up the net. At that very moment, the narrative tells us, Peter responds quite abruptly, he knelt down before Jesus, and exclaimed: *'Depart from me, for I'm a sinful man, O Lord!'*

Can we draw a parallel between these two incidents, both involving Jesus and Peter? I have in fact spoken on these two incidents a couple of years ago, in terms of the spiritual law of repulsion and attraction. However, this morning let us look at Peter's responses from a different angle.

In John 6 the narrative indicates that Jesus performed the miracle of five loaves and two fish and the crowd of five thousand were satisfied. Yet they did not see the deeper meaning of this sign! By the way, in John's gospel the word for miracle is actually 'sign'. Although the crowd were satisfied physically or materially once, they wanted more. When they saw Jesus again, he said to them, *'Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.'* In other words, they did not recognize the feeding of five loaves and two fish was sign/miracle at all? One wonders why. And in response to Jesus' saying, they asked for another sign which prompted Jesus to utter the famous words: *'I am the bread of life!'* In fact, in the course of the conversation no doubt Peter would have listened attentively. When Jesus replied to their request; *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'* We wonder why the crowd went away since they said to Jesus, *'Sir, give us this bread always.'* Don't we see the crowd and Jesus, as it were, on different wavelengths. And so the crowd departed thinking that Jesus was no longer able to satisfy what they wanted.

Not only the crowd departed, but also some followers of Jesus as well. As the narrative continues, they found Jesus' further explanation of the bread of life unpalatable: *This teaching is difficult; who can accept it.*

So why did Peter not leave as the rest had done? We can say, Peter had truly seen the sign and understood what it truly meant. That is why he responded so gallantly, *'Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life?'*

How did Peter see the sign when compared with the crowd? The word 'sign' in John's gospel, as I have said, means miracle. But according to John's gospel a sign is pointing to something more significant than the sign itself. When the Prime Minister of Australia proudly proclaimed at the last election victory: *I believed in a miracle*, he has somewhat devalued the biblical meaning of the word. There is nothing unnatural for the coalition to win, as much as nothing unnatural for the labour party to lose. In political election, there must be a winner and a loser.

But when Peter first heard the words of Jesus, whether in the form of proclamation as in Luke's episode or in the discourse with the crowd as in John 6, the words of Jesus become a sign. But this sign of words must be ratified and confirmed with another sign – of action. This is what the miracles of Jesus are all about. Peter took Jesus words and cast his net. What he caught, he realized immediately, was nothing natural whatsoever. What Jesus said and what Jesus did suddenly dawns on Peter, as one may say, the penny drops, he was confronted with the Holy One of the Almighty. How could he, as Peter understood himself being a sinner, stand in front of the holiness of the Holy One. Hence, the most appropriate words and action, he knelt before Jesus and uttered, *'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.'* And if that is not confession of true repentance, I don't really know what repentance means.

Likewise, in the John 6 narrative, all along Peter is listening to Jesus' conversation and discourse with the crowd as much as seeing the sign of the feeding the five thousand. And once again it is the sign of the words of Jesus and the sign of Jesus' miraculous feeding that prompt Peter to come to his conclusion: that the person he is following has truly the words of eternal life. Only Jesus can satisfy his deepest need. He needs not turn to others for satisfying his search for his deepest need - eternal life.

*'I am the bread of life.'* Both the crowd and Peter heard these words. Both saw the feeding of five thousand. Yet they came to diametrical conclusion. The crowd went away thinking Jesus' words unpalatable because they just thought of 'the bread of life' But Peter realized Jesus' words and action confirms what he said he

was: *'I am.'* This is to say that Peter truly understands who Jesus is and the crowd does not. He is the only one who can give him eternal life.

The word *Sacrament* is not found in the Bible. It combines the meaning of two ideas: mystery and sign as we are taught in the catechism. Sacrament has an outward and visible sign but with an invisible and spiritual meaning. That is to say, sacrament means the secret purposes of God revealed in Jesus. Is it not the reason why we come to Eucharist every Sunday? John 6:34 reads:; “*‘Master,’ they said, ‘give us this bread – give it to us always!’*” May this be our prayer every time when we come to the Lord’s Table. For it is in Eucharistic worship we hear the sign of Jesus’ words and participate the action of sign in sharing the bread and wine with the risen Lord. In Eucharist we anticipate our deepest needs have been met - the foretaste of eternal life.

Every time we come to Eucharist, may we, like Peter, be attentive to the words of Jesus which is the sign pointing us to His action in the bread and wine which in turn is the sign pointing us to his death. And after receiving and before we leave church may we respond gallantly as well by saying: *‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’*