



17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

'Never forget the blessings of the Lord'

It is very easy to take things for granted. Take electricity for example. I'm sure that we don't think twice about getting up in the morning and switching on a light, putting on a kettle and listening to the radio or TV. We switch on the computer, we take something out of the fridge; it's all there, it's all at our disposal. And yet, not so many years ago, little of this would have been possible. The miracle that is electricity is not that old after all. A mere 150 years or so ago and none of this would have been possible: light would have been provided by gas and, not long before that, by candles. A mere sixty years before Henry Allingham was born (the man who has just died aged 113) we lived in a different world, one which his grandparents may have remembered. Today, we take it all for granted, unless that is, we have a power cut, which we did a couple of weeks ago. It was a long power cut, too, lasting nearly 24 hours. People were working in the hall, getting ready for that party by the light of candles; I was struggling to read by candlelight. All very romantic, no doubt, but very inconvenient.

Perhaps we need a power cut like that to remind us of how important electricity is, and how we shouldn't take it for granted.

But what else do we take for granted? I only ask this question because today's Gospel tells one of the most familiar stories in the Old Testament: the story of the five barley loaves and two fish. And because the theme involves bread we quite rightly interpret it as referring to the Eucharist, the Mass. John himself tells us that this story occurs shortly before the feast of the Passover, which is when Jesus sits down with his disciples for the Last Supper, which is also the First Mass. If you read on beyond the verses given to us today you will find yourself on the territory covered by next week's Gospel, in which Jesus tells us that he is the Bread of Life. So the theme of today is undoubtedly Eucharistic, it is undoubtedly about the Mass.

The danger about this is that we can take the daily and weekly miracle that is the Mass for granted. Just like electricity. Think about it. We come here and it may be that we have been distracted by a whole host of worries or concerns. No doubt our lives can be a strain at times. Heaven knows we have enough to worry about, what with global warming, financial crisis, swine flu and the rest. But despite all this, in the midst of all this, Jesus comes to us in bread and wine. The miracle of the five loaves and two fishes, in which five thousand are fed, is as nothing to the miracle that Jesus gave his disciples at that Last Supper and which they in turn pass down to us: that bread that we take, the wine that is poured out, becomes, through the action of the Holy Spirit, the living Body and Blood of the Lord.

But because this happens day by day and week by week, the danger is that we forget what a miracle it is and what a precious gift it is: Jesus given for us, Jesus with us, Jesus within us.

Perhaps, in a way it is good that we have had this swine flu epidemic. The Archbishops have directed us to respond to the problem of the transmission of the virus: while this bug is in our midst, we are asked to refrain from receiving from the chalice and receive only the Host, for the time being. Very soon, I hope, we will be able to drink from the chalice once more.

Now I want to stress that receiving only Host does not in any way diminish our communion with the Lord. It is a very ancient teaching of the Church that to receive in what is called one kind (either the Host or the Chalice) is still to make a full communion, so we are not deprived in any way.

But we may, perhaps, use this period fruitfully. The mere fact that the chalice will not be given for a few short weeks can give us the opportunity to remember the importance of the Mass, and the importance of what it is that we receive. Sometimes we need a period like this to remind us never to take such things for granted. Just as we don't realise how vital electricity is until we have a period without it, so perhaps during this period we can remind ourselves of the importance of the Mass, that there is something greater here than bread and wine: we are in the presence of God: God the Spirit makes God the Son present on our Altar, who is offered to God the Father and then given to us. What an awe inspiring thought, but how easy it is to forget. We stand on holy ground: be still for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.