

Homily, 18th Sunday of the Year (B), 2nd August 2015

Today's readings focus us on what is truly life-giving. Jesus says, "I am the Bread of Life" and St Paul says, "Don't lead aimless lives" – meaning, don't lead lives without purpose, without direction. Don't waste your time on earth.

This chimes deeply with the news of the week. I am quite sure that if I asked anyone who has watched the news or read a paper in the last five days what is the name of the lion shot in Zimbabwe, you would tell me. It is Cecil. And he was killed by a dentist on safari. But here is where it gets difficult. Because in the last few weeks roughly two people a week are killed trying to cross the Channel Tunnel on the top of Eurostar trains. Do we know their names? Their family details? And so, dear friends, right now we are in a society which has lost sight of what is truly life giving. The death of the lion matters – undoubtedly – but there is a very troubling trait in what is going on here, that I heard described like this; "We are humanizing animals and dehumanizing people." It really matters – the lion is given a name, a personality, and the migrants are left anonymous, faceless. And so our Prime Minister talks about migrants "swarming" around Calais, and it fits the same narrative – bees swarm, not people. Just notice this, and remember it whenever you see the news. In amongst the migrant camp at Calais there is a fifteen foot church made of bits of metal and tarpaulin, where Eritrean Christians come to pray. If they worshipped in Eritrea they would be imprisoned or killed. We speak about communion – these people are our sisters and brothers.

Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." As you know, I have spent the last week in Lourdes, and there I have seen a truly blessed hope. For me, this is what is life-giving, hopeful. On Friday morning the young people sat with Bishop Alan and asked him questions. They were the kind of questions only young people could ask; "Bishop Alan, can you do an Essex accent?" "Bishop Alan, just how proud of us are you?" And of course, more serious questions, including when one asked, "When we get home next week, and we are back in our normal lives, how do we hold onto the spirit of Lourdes?" Bishop Alan thought for a moment, and then spoke about St Ignatius, as it was his feast day. He said Ignatius had a great phrase, "Notice the difference," and he invited our young people to do precisely that. He asked them to concentrate, then and there, on a moment in the week that had been especially powerful for them, and he said to them, "notice the difference" – the difference of service, of prayer, of giving yourself. Then, when you are back at home, and if you feel yourself drifting, come back to that moment, notice it, and seek out opportunities to live it at home, in your school, in your parish.

And so let me share with you just a couple of such moments. Travelling with us was Colleen, who has been with us for many years as an adult pilgrim, but this year was different. Her husband died about fifteen months ago, and last year she could not face the trip without him. This year she came, and she went everywhere with tears in her eyes. It moved all of us who encountered her, and moved our young people to tears as she gently told them about Roger, and how she missed him. She cried at communion at every one of our Masses, because two years ago he would have been next to her, receiving communion alongside her. And then, when we went into the mountains in Gavarnie, I saw her smile at the sheer beauty of it, and she remembered being there with Roger, and was swept into the glory of it. I pray for Colleen.

Also with us was Timothy, a young man who had very severe special needs. He could not be still for long, but would walk around, needing to be watched all the time. He had his hands to his ears much of the time, because he heard voices in his mind. At times he was obviously in mental pain, at other times there would be a brilliant smile, and moments of peace. Through it all Liam, from this very parish, accompanied him. Patiently, kindly, he would walk wherever Tim walked, would gently guide him back to his place, would help to feed him, and wash him. And Liam stands for all of our young people who served those of different ages, and different needs, throughout the week. They saw beyond any frailty, illness or disability, they saw beyond the wheelchair or the walking frame, and they met the person, and it is a magnificent narrative of hope.

Jesus says, "I am the Bread of Life." As you survey the landscape of your life, what is truly life-giving for you? What energises you? What would you spend more time on, if you could? Above all, let us be sure that we are truly focused on what is life giving. Animal conservation matters deeply, but let's be sure that we are not humanising animals and dehumanising people.

And as Bishop Alan said to the young people in Lourdes, "notice the difference." Notice the difference of service, of prayer, of generous hearted giving. We do know when we are in a life-giving place. We feel it, we want to get up in the morning. All of this is Jesus, the Bread of Life, lived. Here at Mass, here and now we receive the nourishment that precisely sustains us to get out there and live it as we personally, intimately and completely receive Jesus, the Bread of Life.