

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year B)
Sunday 27th June 2021

Last week I spoke about our parish vision, reminding us what we have already said we want to be as a parish. At the risk of labouring the point, here it is again:

"We are striving to be followers of Christ, loving the Lord, loving his Church, and loving his world; committed to growing together in faith and friendship, and to serving one another and the world around us."

Pope Francis refers to the parish as 'the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters' (Evangelii Gaudium n28, quoting St John Paul II) and one of the interesting aspects of the current pandemic has been the fact that we have had to communicate so much through the internet that, like it or not, a great deal of church has taken place in people's homes. While it is always better for us to be physically present together in the same place, we might want to reflect at some stage on the ways in which bringing the church into our homes has offered, and still offers, new opportunities.

Pope Francis also describes the parish as 'a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary activity' (EG n 28). This is, for us, more challenging. There is no doubt that people come to us when they are thirsty: people come for help when they are sick; they come for help when they are bereaved; they come for good news when they are preparing for marriage, or for the baptism of a child, or for first communion or confirmation. They come to drink the cooling waters of God's love when they are anxious, or troubled, or lonely. In dozens of different ways people come to the parish for the water of the Holy Spirit to slake their different thirsts. In the past this has often meant a visit to the Pastor, the Parish Priest, and for a long time this worked well enough. But Pope Francis does not say that the Pastor is the sanctuary where people come to drink, he says that the parish is. It is not his vision – nor, to be fair, was it the vision of his predecessors - that the Pastor is the sole dispenser of living water. Indeed, as the deployment of clergy changes over the next few years the chances are that the Pastor may spend little time in any one part of his parish. This thirst-quenching will either need to be done by the wider parish community, or it will not be done at all.

Lets put this in a slightly different way. We all want to belong to a church that is welcoming: but who makes it that way? Each of us has a role to play in making strangers and visitors welcome. We all want to belong to a church that cherishes and nurtures our children: but who makes it that way? We all want to belong to a church that cares for our sick sisters and brothers, but who does the caring? We all want to belong to a church that is beautiful, safe and fit for purpose, but who makes sure that our buildings are that way? We all want to belong to a church that is financially solvent, and more than solvent is generous and charitable, but who oversees all this? We all want to belong to a church that walks beside the bereaved, that shares its wisdom with young couples, that makes a space for the stranger: but

who makes all this happen? We all want to belong to a church that cares about the poor and the weak, that learns more about their needs and joins in their struggles for dignity, but who is making all this happen, who is helping us to be more like this? We all want to belong to a parish which seeks to grow, to be so lively and life-giving that people want to join it, but who is going to oversee all this?

Pope Francis' vision of a parish as a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey is a beautiful one, but it does demand a radical change of culture. At times in the past the parish has been viewed as a place where the Pastor and a particularly keen few put on activities and events for people who like that sort of thing. But if we are going to be serious about Pope Francis' vision, about being disciples who serve, that will need to change. We must each expect to have some ministry within the parish, some role to play in making this sanctuary for the thirsty a concrete reality. There are many things that are either done very imperfectly by me, the Parish Priest, or not done at all, and if we are to claim to be a parish, this will need to shift. I don't say this because I feel I have so far succeeded in doing lots of jobs; I say it because, in genuine humility, I realise that I have failed to share these roles out, failed to help people become hungry to serve. But I am aware of the passing of the years, and I do not want to hand over, one day, a parish where the burden falls too heavily on the priest, a burden that prevents him from having the freedom to be what he is meant to be, but also prevents the parish being the kind of community it is called to be. I would like us to try and work together to make Pope Francis' dream a reality in this place, and I will talk more about what this might mean next week.

Today's Gospel gives us a good image of a lively parish. It would be a place where, in the middle of our daily anxieties and trials, Christ offers us healing and resurrection. We are part of a community – a genuine community, that is, where people engage with one another and care about one another, where each of us comes to the Eucharistic table to receive the medicine of immortality. Here we hope to make real, make concrete, the power of Christ that healed the sick woman in today's Gospel, and there can be no bystanders in achieving that. It needs to involve us all, and I will speak about this some more next Sunday.