

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Sunday 15 of Ordinary Time (Year B)
Sunday 11th Jul 2021

I am not sure quite how this Gospel reads to you, but it makes me feel pretty uncomfortable. I read it thinking 'please don't ask me to do this, please don't ask me...' I would be grateful for the sandals, as I have soft and sensitive feet, but I am not good when I am hungry so I would really want to take bread, and there are a few other things I would want so no haversack is a problem, and no coins means no coffees, pastries etc, and with no spare tunic I would soon look a mess; it all sounds very challenging. I am not by nature a light traveller, and this is going to be very tricky, so please not me, please not me.... I suppose people were tougher then, more used to living on the edge, living a life without the material comforts that we take for granted, but all the same this seems pretty extreme. So, what is going on here?

The first thing to note is, of course, the context. This story follows immediately on from last week. Last week Jesus was amazed at the lack of faith among the people in his own town and he could work no miracles there. His response to failure is not to lick his wounds, or to question himself or his mission, it is to get out there, touring the towns and villages and sending the disciples out in pairs, too, so that the area is flooded with the Good News. It can be quite disheartening when people do not want what we treasure so much; when they count as worthless what we count as priceless; but the response is never to despair, or to give up, but to look for new ways of presenting the riches of the Good News.

The second point about this story is that the disciples are sent out with nothing, and so they have nothing to hide behind. No glossy brochures, no resources, no presentations, no books to hand out or social media posts to share: it is just them, all they have to share is their friendship with Christ. It is good for us to find new ways to share the message, new ways to present the Good News, but however carefully we prepare and curate the method, the means, it is the content that matters. The disciples are people who have met Christ, have seen him look on them with infinite mercy and tenderness, and have responded with generosity so that their lives have been turned upside down, and in that they have found great joy; and basically that is it. There is nothing for them to hide behind, all there is for them to do is present themselves as living testimony to the power of Christ to enrich the human life. Life with him is better than life without him, and they are the living proof of that. That, in the end, is pretty well all there is to it. They can only, really, tell the story of how the life of Christ has invaded and enriched their lives. And because that is all they can do, they must first think for themselves what this story sounds like, they must tell the story to themselves, get it clear in their heads, understand just how it happened and what it means, and then the story is ready to tell.

St Peter writes: “in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence;” (1 Peter 3.15). Always be prepared to explain what has happened between you and him. With nothing to hide behind, the disciples are left with no choice. Perhaps Peter had this incident in mind when he wrote those words. Perhaps he remembered well what it was like when he had to go out and tell the story with no tools and no teacher to hide behind, and realised that it could only be done by reflecting on that story so that it would come to life for other people.

And the Lord tells the disciples that if people in any place refuse to listen to them, they should shake the dust of that town from their feet. When Jewish people came from Gentile territory back to their own land they would first shake the Gentile dust from their feet, so that it would not mix with the dust of home. This is not about turning their backs on people who do not listen, giving up on them, that will never happen, but it is about saying that negativity and opposition can be very draining; they need to be left behind. There is no use pining over what might have been, endlessly going over the arguments that might have been more convincing, or the clever retort that might have persuaded someone. In the end this is fruitless and a waste of time. If the preaching in one place doesn't work, it is just time for them to move on to somewhere else. They need to understand, as do we, that by and large people are not argued into the Kingdom, not persuaded into it by clever words. They are drawn into it by finding it first interesting, then engaging and then entrancing. If they are not yet ready to listen, there is no point in wasting words. It is time to move on.

So, where does this Gospel passage leave us? It draws us in to a world of possibility. It is possible to take heart and remain positive and full of hope, even in the face of apparent failure; we cannot allow ourselves, even in the most difficult of times, to be governed and crippled by the negativity of others. The scary removal of the props and helps that we can hide behind turns out to be as beneficial as it is challenging, because what is convincing for people is not the clever argument, or the slick presentation, but the life that has been transformed by Christ. The old story is told once again, the story that breaks into our culture at its weakest and most unconvincing, the story that tells us that greatness is not measured by how good we are at acquiring and hoarding things, but by how good we are at letting them go.