

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time  
Year B

First Holy Communion  
Sunday September 5<sup>th</sup> 2021

Today's Gospel story contains one little detail that we could very easily miss. We get carried away with the story of the man who could neither hear nor speak clearly, and we are caught up in the wonderful story of his healing, and so unless we are paying very close attention we miss something vital. How did he come to be with Jesus, this man with no hearing and no voice? Did he go looking for Jesus himself? No, look again at what the Gospel says: 'they brought him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech'. His friends bring him to see Jesus. This is a familiar pattern: you might remember the story about a man who was paralysed, so obviously he couldn't make his own way to see Jesus, instead his friends carried him there and lowered him on a stretcher through a hole they had made in the roof of the house where he was teaching. There are other examples in the Gospels, too. When someone desperately needs the help of Jesus, their friends bring them to a place where he will be passing by.

After the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, something similar continues. When the apostles are teaching in Jerusalem, people bring their sick friends out into the streets, to a place where they know St Peter will pass by, so that his shadow might fall across them. Again and again people bring their friends, especially their friends who are sick or in some special need, to a place where Jesus or his apostles will pass by. The best thing that they can do for their friends, they know, is to put them in the place where they are most likely to meet Jesus. That is what happens in today's Gospel, and the faith of those friends is rewarded when the man is healed: he can hear again, he can speak again.

So, we can see that the Gospel today is an important story about healing, but it is also important for another reason: it is a story about how some people's lives are completely changed, because another person has brought them to a place where the Lord will pass by. Now at every Baptism, the parents and godparents promise that they will train their children in the practice of the faith: that means that they promise to place their children in exactly the right place where Christ will pass by. That really is what it means to practice our faith, it means putting ourselves again and again in the places where we are most likely to encounter Jesus. That is what the parents of our First Holy Communion children do when they bring them to the church, to Mass: they put their children in a unique place, a place where they are most likely to encounter Jesus Christ. He comes to us in the reading of the Gospels, he comes to us in the gathering of the people, in the preaching of the priest, but above all he comes to us in the Most Holy Sacrament, in the bread that has become his body, the wine that has become his blood. The First Communion Mass that we celebrate this weekend is one of the high points of parents and godparents making good those promises. They bring their children to the place where Christ will pass by, just as the deaf man's friends did in today's gospel.

Parents want the best for their children, of course, and that is one of the crucial parts of parenting: they help their children learn to read, as it will stand them in good stead in later life; they help them learn to be polite, to say ‘thank you’ for gifts and acts of kindness for the same reason; they help them learn how to be generous and kind, to make people’s lives better, for the same reason once again – this is all part of equipping their children for the best sort of life. Placing them in just the right place to meet Christ as he passes by is another example of exactly the same thing, it is another example of equipping their children with what they need for a fulfilled and happy life. So, well done to the parents! But if we read the Gospels carefully, we will see that this is not just about a strong person bringing a weaker one, or an older person bringing a younger one: this pattern of one person bringing another to the place where Christ is passing is much more important than that. Andrew the apostle brings his brother, Peter, to meet Jesus; then Philip the apostle does the same for Nathanael. This seems to be a pattern throughout the Gospels: someone is so excited by the way in which Jesus changes lives that they cannot keep it to themselves, they feel they must bring others to meet him, bring them to the place where his is likely to pass.

So, for our young people who make their First Holy Communion today, there is a lovely message here. Your parents want what is best for you; they have tried to do this as well as they can, and part of that is bringing you here; they have brought you to the place where you are most likely to meet Jesus, not just today but every day. What you need to help you get through the week, to help you be full of joy at the good times, and to help you get by the sad times, all this you receive at this altar. You are like the man in today’s Gospel, brought by people who love you to a special place. But it is over to you now: you need to learn to be like Zacchaeus, who put himself in just the place where Jesus would pass by, and his life was transformed. There are lots of good and exciting things in life, and sometimes they can distract us from what really matters. But I hope you will have the wisdom to say ‘All these things are good, but really I need to put myself in the place where Christ will pass by’. You might grow up and be able to offer just the same gift to your friends. You might even be able to repay your parents by saying to them sometimes ‘Let me take you somewhere special, let me take you to the place where Christ will be passing by’ and you can bring them to the altar, to the place where once they brought you.