

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty-Ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time (B)
Sunday 17th October 2021

Autumn Message Series 'Catholic Identity'

People of Prayer, People of The Sacraments

So let us return to the question, who are we, us Catholics? What marks us out and distinguishes us from others, what are the things that mould and shape our lives? I spoke last week about us as people of The Word, people whose lives are formed and shaped by the great story of God's love affair with his world, and the little stories that make that story real in the scriptures.

Today I want to reflect for a few minutes on what it means to be people of prayer, people of the sacraments. We believe in an unseen world; not everything that matters can be seen, or touched, or heard. Of course, to some extent everybody believes in an unseen world. Everybody believes in love, and hope, and trust, although none of these things can be seen or touched. As Catholics we take this to its logical conclusion. We don't just want to know some bits of the unseen world, some little glimpses; we want to know the whole thing. Where does it come from? What is it for? How does it work? Why does it matter?

We believe that there is so much that cannot be seen, that the world is just so much richer, and more amazing, and more beautiful than just what we can pick up with our senses. We believe that if you focus only on what the senses can pick up, you live an impoverished life. We believe that if you look at the way the world has developed, if you keep asking the question 'What came before that?' in the end you get to the point where only one answer is possible: at the very beginning was God, nothing else makes sense. We also believe that this God who created the world is not some crazy inventor who made a world, set it running, and then went off to ignore it and do his own thing. He remains passionately involved with his world, deeply committed to it, and always present to it, always at work in it.

So, a really important part of who we are as Catholics, is the belief that we can be in contact with 'deep reality', with the unseen world which many people have allowed themselves to lose touch with, and that contact allows us to lead lives that are far richer and more profound because of it. This contact with deep reality, with the world that is hidden to the senses but is there all the same, comes through prayer and the sacraments.

Principally, this is what prayer is: time spent consciously and deliberately in close contact with the unseen world of deep reality; time spent in the presence of the Creator. Whether that prayer is alone or in a group; whether it is spoken or silent; whether it uses a set form of words or blows where the Spirit wills, whether it is prayer of intercession or prayer of

thanksgiving, whatever sort of prayer it is, its principal characteristic is that it places us in contact with a world beyond our senses. And this contact with the divine world changes us; it resets our priorities, it rubs off on the things that we think matter to us, it makes us more human. Spending time with the Holy One helps us to become, ourselves, more holy.

In the sacraments, all this is true and more. When we come to the sacraments, we are not only in the presence of the Holy One, but the Holy One is doing something, he is acting. It is really Christ who baptises, Christ who heals and forgives, Christ who offers himself on the cross, and feeds us. It is lovely, of course, to see our friends, to sing a little, to hear some familiar readings and perhaps even a helpful homily, all of that is very nice – but it is the presence and the action of the unseen Holy One that really matters. If we are going to make sense of the trials and the joys of daily life, we will do so far better if we face them having first entered the presence of the Holy One.

When the martyrs of Abitene were interrogated in 304 as to why they had been celebrating Mass when it was specifically prohibited, the answer was simple: 'without Sunday Mass we cannot live'. It was worth risking everything for, because this contact with the Holy One, this encounter with deep reality, these few moments in touch with the world that really matters, was essential for them even to live. They had discovered that life without Sunday Mass was not really life at all. They were able to see beyond the physical things, the distractions and the annoyances, the things that didn't quite go right and the bits of the liturgy that were perhaps not perfect, and they had seen that here they draw close to something unique, something better than anything else in the world.

So, who are we as Catholics? We are people in love with deep reality, people touched by something beyond time, people who know that the most precious things in life cannot be touched or seen, and so we put ourselves, again and again in the best place to meet them.

So, when the Catholics of Kazakhstan were deprived of a priest in the 1960s and could no longer have Mass, they were distraught. But they did not give up, and each year one of them walked 1,000 kilometres to find the nearest priest, who would hand over the Blessed Sacrament to them for them to bring home to the community (Bp A Schneider 'Dominus Est'). As Catholics we believe that there are lots of great things that we get to do in life, lots of things that are fun, and interesting, and even good, virtuous and improving; but there is nothing like contact with deep reality, nothing so enriching and life-giving. There is nothing that makes us so human, so fully ourselves, as coming into the presence of the Holy One. We are people of Prayer, People of The Sacraments.