

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)  
Sunday October 24<sup>th</sup> 2021

## Autumn Message Series 'Catholic Identity'

### People of The Church

Over the last few weeks I have been trying to answer the question 'Who are you, you Catholics? Where do you find your identity, the thing that makes you distinct?' Of course, the answer is not a simple one, but we have thought about what it means to be people on the way – or disciples – people of character, people of the Word, people of prayer and worship, and today I want to think briefly about what it means to be people of The Church.

Happily, the second reading today gives us a bit of a way into this when it says that a priest is appointed to act for people in their relations with God – so the Church, a priestly people, acts as a bridge between God and his people, leading people deeper into the mystery of God, deeper into the mystery of eternal life, the mystery of humanity at its finest. And this began for each one of us at baptism, when our parents rejected, decisively and deliberately, the lies and the tricks of the Devil, and handed us over into the care and the shelter of God. We became, then, a part of that great story, which I spoke about when I talked about people of The Word, the story of God's love affair with his people. And we can see that story played out through the history of The Church. We can see how men and women before us have responded to that. The stories of the saints are a part of our story, too, and we can rejoice at their triumphs, learn from them, place our hands in theirs because we are fellow travellers with them. We are a people that stretches back through time and history, and the stories of the saints need to be told and retold among us, just as any family history does. We celebrate the saints because they are family; they help us. We are not alone, there are unseen brothers and sisters who summon us to greater things, summon us to live life to the full. We are people of the Church, brothers and sisters of the saints.

In The Church we are given the tools that we need to live life to the full. We are shown the best of human life; we see what a human life lived for others might look like; we see how relationships with other people might work at their best; we learn how to tell the difference between the things that really matter, and the things that don't; we learn to face up to what are the deepest longings of our hearts, and how to fulfil them in ways that are lifegiving; we learn how to love, but also how to be loved; we learn what we can really hope for in life, and where to find it. The Church is a school for human life lived to the full, and as people of The Church we are students at that school. Like all the best schools, it is a challenging place, it is always pushing us to go higher; in this case to live better, to be more and more truly the people we were created to be. We need to be people of the Church because we need that challenge.

And as people of The Church we are people who fast, and people who feast. In our wealthy culture, where pretty well all foods are available all the time, for most people every day's diet is much the same as the previous day and the next. But The Church has preserved a more ancient, and more human rhythm. We know that Friday is the day on which Our Lord allowed himself to be handed over to death out of love for us, and we honour this fact, we mark this truth, by abstaining that day from meat; we know that we can easily become victims of our own good fortune, and can become obsessed with food and other things that are good in themselves, but make better servants than masters, and so we try to regain control by fasting – principally in Lent, but at other times as well. We regain control of our desires, and at the same time we identify with those who have no choice but to fast, and this leads us once again deeper into the mystery of God. And then there are glorious moments when we are lifted from the everyday into the realm of deep joy, the days of feasting, the celebrations of Christmas and Easter but also our saints days, anniversaries of baptism, marriage, ordination. We are a people who know how to fast, and because we know how to fast we also know how to feast.

One of the great things about being a people of The Church is that, strange as it may sound, we don't need to be in a church building for all this to happen. In fact, there is something very important about the Catholic home. The Catholic Home is different from other homes, because here Christ is the head. It is a place where visitors are welcomed just because they are God's children, not because anything is asked of them; it is a branch of that field hospital that Pope Francis speaks about, a place where there is true joy, hope, love and faith. It cannot be mistaken, the Catholic home, because the crucifix on the wall and the images of the saints remind us that we choose to live surrounded by our heroes, our examples and our helpers. In a lonely, cynical and materialistic culture the Catholic home is a precious outpost of something more humane.

Which brings us to a close, with the recognition that our Catholic identity truly is a gift to the world. In recent years various authors have struggled with the fact that Christianity, a tiny seed of faith in a remote part of the world, that never set out to force itself on people, grew into something so vast as The Church. How did this happen? The only plausible answer, it seems, is that people saw the way that Christians lived, and saw that it was simply a better, more noble, more authentic, more life-giving, more kind and hopeful, generous and joyful, way of living. People were converted to this faith by example; it just looked a better way of living than the alternatives. It still is, and our challenge is to make sure that the way we live it helps other people to see that.