

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year B)
Sunday April 25th 2021

There always seems something a little strange about some of the scripture readings for Mass in Eastertide. The First Reading is always from the Acts of the Apostles, the book that tells us the story of how the Church grew after the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ, which all seems fair enough. But the Gospel reading takes us back into the life of the Lord long before his death and resurrection: the First Reading is about the time after Easter, but the Gospel is set long before it. We have some stories from the Gospels of the appearances of the risen Lord, but today we are in a time long before his passion and resurrection. We have to make a bit of a mental adjustment to make sure that we have this straight in our minds. But it does invite us to reflect a little on the nature of story-telling, and the power of stories.

Stories have a power and a meaning all of their own. We can sometimes read a story and understand exactly what it was meant to communicate. BUT it is also true that the meaning of a story can be deepened and expanded and enhanced by context. There are some stories that I might read today and, because of the experiences I have had and the reflection that I have done in the course of my adult life, they will speak to me in a different way now to how they spoke to me when I was a teenager, say. A person who creates a story puts into it what they want to say, but to some extent it then takes on a life of its own and speaks to different people, in different contexts, in different ways.

This, I hope, helps us to read the scriptures today in a way that brings them to life. The Apostles who gathered together after the Resurrection would remember the speech that Jesus gave about being the Good Shepherd; they would remember where he spoke this, and when. It is a story that has found its way into their own life-story. But then, once he rose from the dead, they would have told each other all these stories again: 'Do you remember that time when he said..., when he did...' And as they tell these stories again, now knowing that he has been put to death and risen again, they would look back on them and say 'Yes now I see what he was getting at, now it all makes sense!' So they would say to one another 'Do you remember that time that he said he was the Good Shepherd? He spoke about the hired servant who runs, and the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep – we didn't really get that at the time, but now we do! Now we can see where he was going. Now we know that when he spoke about laying down his life for his sheep that is exactly what he meant – he literally meant allowing himself to be put to death. This story sends a shiver down our spines now.'

So each year we tell again stories from the life of Christ during this Easter season and, reading them in the light of the death and resurrection of Christ we can see within them an extra layer of meaning. This is so important for us. The stories that we tell

from the scriptures, but also the stories that we tell of holy men and women that went before us, and even the stories that we tell of the ways in which Christ has been at work in our own lives, are told and retold not just to make sure we don't forget them, but also so that in our new and different contexts, our new situations, in the light of new experiences, we have a chance to see in them insights, ideas, and messages that we didn't spot last time – or the time before, or the time before that. One of the roles of The Church is to be a repository of stories, a place where they are stored and kept but also a place where they are repeatedly and endlessly retold. When the Church preaches the Gospel it is telling the same story again and again:

God created the world out of love, but he chose to make us free to decide how to act; often we have abused that freedom and acted in ways that damage others, we have loved our own self more than other people and in doing so have brought slavery and misery upon ourselves, but God has chosen to step in and offer us a way back to freedom and joy through Christ, his Son.

That is the fundamental story, and we tell it again and again. But we hear it differently according to context. I might hear it one day and say 'stuff and nonsense, I do as I please and I am as free as a bird' but then, after finding I am obsessed with my own pleasure at the expense of others, and finding how hard it is to break out of that, after being shocked into realising I am not as in control of my choices as I thought, I will hear the story in a different way.

The Resurrection of Christ is the great story, and it is a lens through which we can examine all of life, all of our stories, all of our past and all of our future hopes. Every time we tell these stories they have assumed a new edge. This year we tell the story of the Resurrection, the story of Christ the Good Shepherd, the story of Peter's preaching about the rejected stone that becomes the cornerstone, in the light of an ongoing pandemic. The stories challenge us to ask, what sort of a world do we hope to wake up to after this nightmare? How can we be as challenging as Peter was to help create a new way of living together? What does it mean to live in this new world as children of God? What would the Good Shepherd be doing here and now, what would it mean for him to be laying down his life for the sheep? Who or what are the wolves we need to guard against? What does it mean to be known by him in the midst of this chaos, and do we listen to his voice? What have we learnt about shepherding in a world where there are so many lost sheep, and how can we do this better?