

## The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year B)  
Sunday May 2nd 2021

Just imagine for a moment the scene in Jerusalem. The Christians there remember well the crucifixion of Jesus; even better they can remember how Stephen was taken outside the city and stoned to death, while a young man named Saul looked on with approval. The last time they saw Saul he was 'breathing threats and murder' against them, and asking for permission to go hunting Christians in Damascus so that they could be brought to Jerusalem in chains. Now here he is, standing among them! They may well have heard about his conversion, they may have heard that he had to escape Damascus by being lowered over the wall in a basket so as not, himself, to be attacked for his faith in Christ, but all the same can they really trust him? Here is the man who watched approvingly over the death of their friend, Stephen, whose role on the new church community was to distribute food to the hungry. But Barnabas speaks up for him, tells the story of his conversion, and so it is that the peculiar Christian gift of generous forgiveness reaches out to him and embraces him. He was indeed the one who watched Stephen killed, Stephen the feeder of the hungry and protector of the widow, but now he is a new man, with a new life and he deserves a new start. This is true generosity. It is a bit of a rocky road, and not everyone gets on with Saul, but as he sets off on a preaching tour the churches experience a time of peace. Perhaps the conversion of this persecutor into apostle sets back the people who want to silence the young church, but we are told that the new Christian communities are left in peace: 'building themselves up, living in the fear of the Lord, and filled with the consolation of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 9.31). There will be more times of persecution and danger in the future, but for now all is quiet. And so the young Christian churches set about using that quiet time wisely.

They build themselves up. It would be tempting, once the persecution stops, to coast along and say 'that's better, all is quiet, lets take it easy'. They don't do this. They consciously and intentionally set to work on addressing the questions 'how can we become a stronger, more authentic, more holy and more convincing vision of the Body of Christ – lets get to work'; and at the same time ' how can each of us become a more convincing, true and transparent disciple, living in the love and presence of the Lord'. The persecution has stopped, but there is still work to be done. They build themselves up. Whatever the circumstances of our lives are, it is always the time to be building ourselves up in faith. What am I doing to build myself up, to make sure that I am more open to the transforming grace of the Lord tomorrow than I was today? Have I let this slip a little, and allowed myself to coast?

They live in the fear of the Lord. This is not the sort of fear that a slave feels for a capricious and demanding master, or the sort of fear that a child feels for an abusive parent. This is living in awe, this is carrying around within them each day a sense of 'Wow – God is someone so amazing, so beautiful, so tender, so generous, so loving, so good to be part of, and I really don't want to mess this up'. Fear of the Lord is not a fear of what God might do

to me, it is fear of my own ability to mess it all up. Jesus knows about this, and so perhaps the apostles in Jerusalem reminded each other of something that Jesus once said. Perhaps they reminded each other that he had described himself as the vine, and them as the branches. A fruitful life depends on living absolutely bound up with Christ, so that each day we can drink deeply from the sap that rises, from the life of Christ that sustains and enlivens. In a restless world we need to find a certain stability, and that stability comes from drinking deeply of the vine of life. Do I live in awe each day? Am I daily amazed at the beauty of God? Do I realise just how close I sometimes come to messing it all up and losing contact with him?

They are filled with the consolation of the Holy Spirit. As they build themselves (and one another) up, as they live in awe at the beauty of God, they find that this opens them up to the Holy Spirit. They do not resist the Spirit's consolation, they do not look elsewhere for consolation. It can be so tempting to take consolation in physical things, to find in them a remedy (which turns out to be no remedy at all) to our restless sadness and anxiety, but for the first Christian communities it is the warm bath of the Spirit that consoles them. Do I look for consolation in places that are, in the end, no consolation at all, places that might, in fact, turn out to be enslaving rather than liberating?

We have this little glimpse today into the life of one of the early Christian communities, and it is a challenge to us individually and collectively. They don't do anything very complicated or clever, but nor do they sit back and assume that all will be well. In the times when life seems easy they do three things: they build themselves up; they live in fear of the Lord, awe at his presence, abiding closely in him and drinking deeply from his life; and they allow the consolation of the Holy Spirit to fill them. So it is that, whether things are easy or difficult in the future, they will be in the best place to proclaim again the Good News of Jesus Christ, which is always and everywhere the mission of the Body of Christ.