

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fourth Sunday of Lent (Year B)
Sunday March 14th 2021

Today is the fourth in my series of homilies about the Creed, and I have been using these to explore the question 'Who is this God in whom I have put my trust, what manner of being is he, and what difference does this make to my life?' The Creed is less about theology and more about personality. What I believe God to be like affects the daily decisions of my life: what I believe he is like makes me the kind of person that I am.

Today I want to reflect briefly on the paragraph that begins 'For our sake..' and ends 'his kingdom will have no end.' Last week we reflected on the paragraph that speaks about the birth of Christ, this week we reflect on the paragraph that speaks about his death. Have you noticed that there is nothing there at all about his daily life: his miracles, his teachings, his disciples, these do not appear at all. This is not because they do not matter, but all that happened during the life of Christ is, in a sense, a witness to the meaning of his birth and his death. These events are crucial to who he is, in a way that no other event can be.

'For our sake he was crucified...'. This is very hard for us to get our heads around. Did we ask him to be crucified? Is it what we want? Is it what God wants? Was there really no other way? Many of the gods of the ancient world were angry and vengeful, asking for a heavy price to be paid by their followers otherwise their anger would boil over and they would destroy people. Many of the fake gods of the modern world are exactly the same: the god 'fame' insists that people hide their real selves and conform to what their worshippers want them to be; the god 'wealth' insists that we sacrifice compassion, generosity, simplicity so that we can make sure we stay ahead of the pack; the god 'technology' insists that we become less and less human, less and less at home in the created world so that we can live in a virtual reality; the god 'egoism' requires me to make everyone around me a satellite of me, a servant of me, a tool of mine; the god of 'plans' insists that everyone and everything must be subordinate to the vision of my life that I have created for myself. All these gods are harsh and vengeful, threatening us with destruction if we do not bend our lives to their will. This is not the way with the true God. Our God says 'Here I am; I offer you love, and friendship, healing and freedom. You will have to step away from those other gods that are devouring you, but I will give you myself as food, I will not treat you as food for me. What do you say, what will you do?' And because we want, on some level, a god who is powerful and whose anger destroys, so that we can hitch onto his coat tails and share his power, this was too much for us, and we crucified the Lord. We killed him in the most shameful and humiliating way that we could imagine. We poured all our anger onto him, smashed his body and buried it deep. We will have none of that sort of talk here.

It was not God's will that his Son be murdered. It was God's will that his Son be loving, that he show us there is a better way. God wants his dealings with us to make us more human, whereas the false gods make us inhuman. Some of the Eastern fathers saw this as like a sort of fishing trip. God dangles his Son as a bait in front of the Devil, who slams into the Son to destroy him but in doing so displays the deepest human sinfulness, the lust for power, the frantic resort to violence that will remove this frightening reminder of the power of love for ever, but this is exposed and then defeated by the resurrection.

What do I believe, and who am I becoming? I believe that the false gods that claim my worship are all destructive, they see their worshippers as food to be consumed; the true God sees himself as food to be given to feed his followers. When Jesus rises from the dead we are set free. We no longer need to bother with all those false gods. Their power is an illusion.

The death and resurrection of Christ show us that Christian sacrifice is very different from other forms of sacrifice. All other gods insist on being given things that they need, to stop them being vengeful, because deep down their name is anger: Christian sacrifice is never of something outside ourselves, it is always offering ourselves to God so that he can get to work in our lives, in transforming us into him, making us more real and so more happy, because his name is love.

Jesus will come again, to judge. Does this frighten us? This judgement is an encounter with truth, with who we really are, so in a sense yes it is frightening. But God judges us with perfect love and compassion, he forces us to face reality so that we can take credit for our successes and, because we are forced to face the reality of our failures, we will be able to face up to them, acknowledge them, take responsibility for them and see the reality of the damage we have done, and then move on. Until our failures are fully acknowledged and mourned by us, we can never leave them behind; they are always lurking below the surface, ready to pop up and shame us at any moment. Abuser and victim will not sit together in the Kingdom as if nothing had happened; that would be unjust; both will have been made ready for the Kingdom by a deep encounter with who they are, and what they have done. I believe that I will be judged, and I am glad of it, because it is the only way to be set free from the past. Pope Benedict has a wonderful image of judgement, in which we see 'in happy wonder' that the one who judges us is not some stranger, but the one who has been our lifelong friend, and who prefaces our judgement by laying his hands on us and saying 'Be without fear, it is I' (Introduction to Christianity p 327).

Oh yes, what I believe is making me who I am, and this is good and life-giving.