

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
(Year B)
Sunday 7th November 2021

Jesus is teaching in the Temple in Jerusalem. For the Jewish people of his day, this is the most sacred spot in all the world, a place where they are in the presence of God in a unique way. There is a great deal of hustle and bustle, people coming and going, moving around, speaking, praying, leaving offerings.

In that special place, that unique place of God's presence, he wants to lead his disciples into a deeper understanding of what it means to live in the presence of God. As he travels around with them teaching them and showing them what a good life looks like, he is trying to form them, mould them, more and more into the sort of people for whom living in God's presence will be natural, familiar and joyful. We know that there is much about our lives that we will feel very reluctant to bring into the presence of The Holy One, much that is selfish and ugly and self-indulgent, and we know that one way or another that will have to go before we can hold our heads up high in front of him. Our life on Earth is about becoming, more and more, the sort of person who will feel at home in the presence of God for eternity. That is the search for holiness. If we choose to live lives that are self-focussed, or worse still are unkind and thoughtless of others, we will drift further and further from this; so when we die there will be much that needs to be corrected, and we can even imagine that for some people they have become so alienated from goodness and truth that they would rather not even look for his presence, would rather stay in the darkness of absence.

So, our lives are aimed at becoming more and more the sort of people for whom living in the presence of glory, beauty and truth will be a joy and not a challenge, people who will feel at home among the saints. Put like that, of course, none of us feels ready for this, but it is our aiming for it that matters. As Jesus leads his disciples through the Holy Land, he is doing just the same for them. He is teaching them, forming them, showing them, what a life that is ready to be lived in the presence of glory might look like. We see them have occasional relapses: they argue about who is the greatest, they fall asleep on him, they try to turn him away from the path of the Father's will, they ask foolish questions. They are just ordinary people, still imperfectly formed in holiness, but they do keep going, they do stay close beside him.

Today he is with them in the Temple, and he has another class for them in being formed into people who will be just a little more ready to live in the sight of the Father's glory. In the Temple they can see the well-heeled scribes, well dressed, moving about, receiving the humble greetings of lesser mortals, stepping into the spaces left for them as others stand aside to let them pass. This is not living in a way that makes them ready for the Father's presence. There will be no pushing through to get to the front of the line there! These men

may be in the Temple, may be regular visitors there, may be given places of honour there, but it is all hollow: Jesus can see how their behaviour does not belong there, and frequently as they may attend, he sees that they are not truly at home in the presence of the Holy One.

Then he looks across at the Treasury, and calls his disciples to him. He has seen something that they must not miss. He has seen someone who is indeed truly at home in the Temple, one who is ready to dwell in the presence of the Father. She is not making a great show of it, in fact like most of the people ready to live in the Father's presence you could easily miss her completely. What makes her a person who is well advanced along the road of being ready to live in God's presence is her generosity. It is not really about giving to The Temple, it is about a whole way of life, a whole attitude, a whole approach to the world around her. She receives with gratitude and humility, so she is able to give with joy. She is living a life of deep generosity, and if that means that this day she will go hungry, then so be it. Her generosity to The Temple is great, of course, but what really matters is that this is a sign of a generous soul. It is just one example of a life of generosity.

This widow reminds us of the words that Jesus spoke to his disciples as he sent them out to preach: 'You received without charge, give without charge' (Mt 10.8). The habit of generosity begins with learning how to receive; only once we have learned how to receive can we learn how to give. This woman has learned to receive what little comes her way with a lightness of touch: it is not for hoarding, not for squandering; it has brought her life and joy to receive it, not because it makes her more secure, or more significant, but because it gives her an opportunity to do something good. Because she has learned how to receive, she knows how to give.

So this Sunday's Gospel is a renewed invitation to us all, an invitation to commit ourselves once more to learning the lessons that will make us, more and more, the sort of people who will feel at home in the presence of the Holy One. And today's class at this school is a class in generosity; not just generosity with our money, but also with things we might be even more inclined to hoard, our love, our time, our affection, our emotional engagement, our forgiveness, our understanding. It invites us to learn how to receive with gratitude and even with awe, so that we can share with joy and humility. The scribes made a great show of everything they did; the widow did not, her generosity has become second nature to her so that she barely even notices she is doing something special, and therein lies her holiness.