

Homily for The Twenty-First Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)(23/08/20)

The Collect for Mass today speaks about finding true gladness in the uncertainties of this world. My goodness that speaks loudly into our situation in the late summer of 2020. Seldom before have we experienced a world that is so uncertain. We don't know what will happen now with this disease: we don't know if it will get better, or worse; we don't know if the winter will bring new and difficult challenges, or if it will pass relatively easily; we don't know when, or if, we will have a vaccine, and we don't know if we will ever live in a world that is free from this disease. Tens, hundreds, of thousands of people don't know if they will have a job in a few weeks time, none of us know how much this is all going to cost and how it will be paid for. We don't know from one week to the next where we can easily travel to. We don't know if we can plan events for later this year, or for next year. It is a very uncertain world. And in the middle of all that uncertainty we could certainly do with some 'true gladness'. There are, of course, moments of joy and delight even in these difficult times, but lasting and all-pervading uncertainty is not a place where most people thrive, and for much of the time the news of the world around us seems very short of joy indeed. So, what is the place where true gladness can be found, and how do we fix our hearts there?

Jesus and his disciples are at Caesarea Philippi. This is a city that had been, for a long time, a centre for the worship of Greek gods. In the cliffs outside the city there are shrines to various gods built into the rock. This is the place that Jesus goes to ask his disciples a very important question: Who do people say I am, who do you say I am? Am I just like one of these dumb statues? Am I competing for attention in a religious marketplace? Peter sees the truth: no, you are not like these dumb and lifeless statues, you are the 'Son of the living God'. Jesus is no idol, no image, he is the Son of the living God, the God of life, the God who is lively and life-giving, the God who offers us liveliness and life-to-the-full.

You might remember that I asked the question last week: What is the point of the Catholic Church? And the answer that I gave, which is only one answer, or perhaps is only part of the answer, was that the Church exists to set people free. The fundamental story of the people of Israel is escape from slavery in Egypt; the fundamental story of the Church is Christ conquering death, freedom from death and decay. We are a people of freedom, made to be free, saved to be free, called into freedom. When Jesus asks us 'Who do you say that I am?' he hopes that we will respond as the disciples did. We don't want to throw in our lot with these lifeless gods that cannot give us life: so many things that promise rewards but only enslave us. We want to throw in our lot with the one who is lively himself and life-giving to us. If you choose to live close to Jesus Christ, to listen to his words and to see what he does, to understand him more deeply and to learn to see the world as he does, to live as he does, you will find that here is true gladness. When I find the uncertainties overwhelming, and the darkness of the future is impenetrable, I know that his

words and his actions are where I need to find shelter. He longs to befriend us and to be for us as exciting and as wonderful as the person we love most. When we are very much in love just the sound of the person's voice or the sight of them in the distance is enough to lift our spirits and fill our hearts with joy. That is what the Lord wants to be for us. When we are almost overcome by the uncertainty, he wants to be our place of safety and stability. He wants to speak into our hearts some of those words he spoke into the hearts of people in the Gospels. They are not words of the past, they are words he wants to give to you today. 'Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' The Church exists to set us free; but it also exists to bring us true gladness in uncertain times.