

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 18th June 2023

At some stage in the next year or two we are expecting to have a new translation of the scripture readings for Mass. I expect there will be some gains and some losses – some things that sound better, and perhaps some that sound less good. One thing I shall not be sorry to see the back of is 'he felt sorry for them' in today's Gospel reading. I really am no scholar of New Testament Greek, but I do know that this is a hopelessly inadequate rendering of how Jesus really feels as he looks at this crowd. People who know about these things tell us that it was much more visceral than this – literally. His stomach churns with compassion at how they look, what he sees is so powerful that it affects him physically, his whole body reacts with pity. He sees a crowd that is lost, bewildered, confused, and he cannot bear it.

Seeing this sorry sight Jesus says to his followers 'The harvest is rich, but the labourers are few' – the crowd looks like a flock of sheep without a shepherd. But wait, is it really without shepherds? Aren't there all those priests, and scribes and Pharisees? There are, in fact, lots of shepherds. There are plenty of people who have been tasked with shepherding the people of Israel, but they have failed: specifically, they have failed to be the sort of shepherds whose insides are turned over with pity for the lost and confused. So, when Jesus sees the crowd, and is so deeply moved at how lost they seem, he turns to his friends and, in effect, he says to them: 'These people are lost. Even the ones who are wealthy and successful, whose lives have all the signs of achievement, are struggling to make any sense of their lives, to understand what life is all about. I am calling you to me so that you can learn to be like me, so that you can have the heart of God, so that you, too, can be moved to your guts by how sad this is, and by their need for someone to guide them'. They don't just need any shepherds, they specifically need shepherds who are moved to their insides by what they see.

People, of course, still do need precisely the same sort of shepherds. There still aren't enough of them. So Jesus still calls people to him, so that they can learn to become shepherds. It is important to be clear about exactly what is happening here. He doesn't simply say 'I want you to become a shepherd of the lost people'. He says 'I want you to come close to me so that, by being close to me, you can have the wisdom and the strength and the understanding, but above all the compassion that allows you to be deeply moved by what you see, and having come close to me and become more like me, then you will be ready to be a shepherd.

We are most used to hearing this reading in the context of vocations to the priesthood, the diaconate, and the religious life. The harvest is certainly rich, and beyond doubt the labourers are few. We do need to batter the gates of Heaven and cry out for more, more shepherds after the Lord's own heart, shepherds who are close enough to him to be as deeply moved as he is. But, without in any way wanting to belittle the need for more clergy and religious, I believe the challenge is in some way issued to us all. We can all learn to see the confusion of the people around us; we can all learn to be appalled at how lost they seem; we can all feel it deep inside when we see people looking for happiness in destructive places, see them defending what

matters not at all, while abandoning what is priceless. We do not have to accept this, in fact we must not, because we are the ones close enough to the heart of Christ to feel the pain as he does. Pope Francis once described the parish as 'a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey' (Evangelii Gaudium n. 28) and that is what we need to become, more and more.

We need to be able to see the thirst that underlies our culture: a thirst for love and acceptance; a thirst for understanding; a thirst for justice and for peace; a thirst for meaning, the sense that our lives matter and are going somewhere; a thirst for belonging, for community, and for a place where we can live together in affection, trust and tenderness. This is the thirst that our culture feels, and the heart of Jesus is wrung out with compassion. The people are thirsty and, all at sea, they drink salt water that makes the thirst worse, not better. He wants shepherds who will see the people's thirst and moved with deep compassion, lead people to a sweeter water. We must never become so used to seeing the thirst that we turn away, or ignore it.

The harvest is rich – the thirst is great. The world needs the Church to be a place of compassion and healing, a place at the centre of which is the fountain of living water that is Christ himself. We cannot outsource compassion to the clergy and the religious. It is a call for all of us. We have, all of us, drunk from that fountain of living water and it has eased our own thirst, and the Lord challenges us as he challenged his disciples: 'You received without charge, give without charge'.