

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 2nd July 2023

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus offers us a number of possible alternatives: we might choose to take up our cross and follow him, or we might decide not to; we might find our life (or perhaps more accurately, clutch at our life) and so lose it, or we might release it for Christ's sake, and so find it.

When we hear him speak about taking up our cross and following him, it tends to be the taking up of the cross that stands out for us. We are familiar with what it might mean to follow someone, but the taking up of a cross seems very strange, and very unfamiliar. But the truth is, the two bits go together. The taking up of the cross and the following after him are all part of the one single action. The taking up of the cross has a direction, a purpose: to follow him; that is, to go to all the places that he goes. Jesus instructs his followers that they are not to follow him empty-handed – they must bring a cross with them. They should not shirk or avoid the problems that life throws at them: they should be prepared to live their lives as they really are, they should be realistic, they should accept and live their real lives, the lives they really have, with all their challenges, as opposed to trying to live someone else's life, or live the life they wished they had. We can sometimes feel frustrated or annoyed by the lives we have been given: our physical limitations, our health, our abilities and lack of abilities, and we wish that things were different. We wish we had a different life – different abilities, different circumstances, different opportunities. But no, take up your cross, take up the life that you have been given, not the one you envy someone else of, or the one you wish you had: live your own life, your real life, embrace it and take it up.

And having taken up the life you have been given, the real life that you have, what should you do with it? You should follow after Christ. You should go where he goes. Much as we might say 'yes, of course' to this, the reality is that often we expect him to follow us instead. We expect to go about the lives that we have planned for ourselves, doing all the things that we have chosen, but bringing him with us. I will do what I choose, what is convenient for me, but I want the Lord to be with me in that. So I am, in fact, expecting him to follow me – I want to go where I choose, but bringing him with me. That is not following him, it is leading him.

So we embrace the life we have been given, and we go where Jesus goes. And we ask ourselves, should I clutch at my life (and so lose it) or should I release it (and so find it)? To clutch at life means to grab it and say 'This is my life, I own it, it is just for me and I will do with it as I please'. A look at the Gospels will show us this is a long way from how Jesus lives. His life – the real life that he has been given, belongs to the Father. It is not a possession of his, to be clutched and grabbed (which renders it useless); it is a gift to be used wisely and generously. A life lived generously becomes life-giving for everyone around it; a life clutched at and grabbed at, treated as a possession for me to use rather than a gift for me to offer, becomes fruitless, like the talent buried in the ground: it is safe, but sterile.

Jesus sends his friends out to sing joyfully of his love. He sends them out to go where he goes, and accept what hospitality they are offered: it will be the same as his – sometimes it is joyful and generous, as the Shunemite woman was to Elisha, sometimes it is rejection, and sometimes it will be mean and reluctant. But so be it, what matters is to go where Jesus is, to plant our footsteps in his. And if his presence is not always clear to see, then there remains for us the ultimate question: what do I need to do to bring Jesus into this situation, to make his presence felt in this place? For these people, here, now, in all their need and all their vulnerability, what do I need to do to make his presence known (even if, at this stage, they do not yet recognise him)? If we ask ourselves this question, how can I make the presence of Jesus known in this situation, then we will never be in danger of clutching at our lives and so losing them, because to make his presence felt is always a blessing: people may not realise that is what we are doing, may not realise that he is close to them, but they will definitely know that life is better than they thought, and as a place to start from that is enough.