

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 9th July 2023

Today's Gospel passage contains one of the most sublime of the many sayings of Jesus Christ: "Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest". No-one who hears these words could deny that they turn the heart over. Whatever our circumstances may be at present, we all know that there are times when we would hear those words and call out 'Oh, yes please!' Reading the Gospels you could well conclude that the whole life of Jesus is one long story of him travelling the roads of Israel, stopping again and again in front of the sad, the sick, the unloved and the lonely and saying to them 'Come to me...'

Of course, not everyone hears them, because not everyone is listening. The self-satisfied and the proud, the ones who think that all is well with their lives and that they can manage on their own, will not hear him. As Jesus travels around the countryside, from town to town and from village to village, he does so as a poor and wandering preacher. He is not wearing fine clothes, or escorted by attendants and servants. He wears a workaday outfit, and is accompanied by fishermen and tax collectors. There is nothing about the externals to make anyone stop and listen to him. But all the same there is something magnetic about him, something that makes people stop and pay attention. His humility – the very fact that he doesn't dress himself up to make him look more important – and his transparent genuineness - make people stop and pay attention.

And so he speaks to the people he meets, and says to them over and over again, 'come...rest'. And the sick come to him, and find rest from their sickness; the confused come to him, the anxious, the lost, those burdened by their own failures and losses, and every one of them finds rest in Christ. They will have to go back to their normal lives, of course, but they will do so with a certain inner tranquility, because they know they are not defined by their confusion, anxiety or failure. Someone has stood in front of them, and looked into their eyes, and seen the real person within, and loved them, and this has been, for them, the rest their souls craved.

The next words that the Lord speaks in this Gospel passage seem strange, though: "Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light". How can this be? How can it be that the rest comes from putting on a yoke?

It is important for us to get the visual image right here. Jesus is not handing out yokes like we imagine a milkmaid wearing, something for you to carry alone. He is offering us a place next to him on the shared yoke, the yoke for two, such as oxen wear to pull a cart. He is saying 'Join me in my yoke, and we will walk together, and pull together'. As we put on the yoke that we share with him, we find that is rest indeed. All the weight is taken by him, out of love for us. And so the person who was running about in every direction, confused and unsure where to go or what to do, finds their pace is set for them now, and their direction chosen for them, and so their pace can slow as they slip into the steady rhythm of walking alongside the one who is love. This is rest indeed until our confusion is calmed and we can slip the yoke and continue alone. Or the person

who has been paralysed into inactivity through fear, or guilt, or resentment, or anxiety, finds that they are gently nudged into moving on, moving forward, leaving behind the unhealthy place where they had become trapped, and again the pace is set for them, and all the weight is carried for them, until moving forward becomes comfortable again, and safe, and normal, and the yoke can safely be slipped (for now, at least, because we may need to find this rest in walking beside the Lord many times in the course of a life).

As the Lord travelled through Israel offering rest and comfort, so he does still today. He still says "come to me...find rest". As the Church proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ, it is the Good News of one who is humble, one who already wears the yoke of love that he wants to share with us, to bring us rest. There is no desire that burns more powerfully in the heart of the Lord than the desire to bring us rest. Walking beside him, at a pace he sets for us and in the direction he chooses, we have the powerful sense that all is well. So it is the role of the Church, and all of us who are the local manifestation of the Church, to walk humbly as he did, offering rest to troubled souls. Rejoice, see, your king is coming, humble but triumphant. Humility and triumph go together, they are two sides of a coin. Without the humility that Christ showed, there really is no hope for our world. Pride always leads to disaster, and human pride, which shares a stage with greed and power and abuse and violence and shouting down anyone who dares to disagree, can only lead to disaster. We need the humble king on a donkey: we need him to show the world and its leaders the way, but we also need him to give us rest. We need him to slip down from the donkey, to go even lower (for such is the nature of divine humility that 'even lower' becomes his catchphrase) and share a yoke with us. This is the mystery hidden from the learned and the clever and revealed to mere children. And it is a mystery our world desperately needs to hear, because in it lies our only hope.