

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year B)
Sunday July 4th 2021

The story in today's Gospel follows closely after a hectic time for Jesus and his followers. He has been teaching in parables, healing the sick, addressing crowds, calming a storm, raising the dead, and now he comes home. And here, on his home territory, comes one of the most shocking stories in the Gospels. Jesus meets the people he has known all his life, people you might expect to be right behind him, but even he is amazed by them: they are so lacking in faith that he 'could work no miracle there'. It is one of those rare moments of failure. The people in his home town do not believe in him, and so nothing good comes of the visit.

Again and again in the Gospels we see desperate people coming to the Lord for help; they know they need something, and they believe that he can supply it, and he does. Nazareth is different. The people there do not see that there is anything he can give them; their expectations are so low, they are simply not open to anything happening, and so nothing does. God does not force his power on us, he waits for us to realise that we need him, and then he is able to act. To know what we need, and to believe that he can supply it, these are the keys that unlock his saving action.

As we continue to reflect on the vision we have for a vibrant, attractive and resilient parish there is a warning here from Nazareth. If we expect little, little is what we will get. God responds to our engagement, our 'yes', our opening up of our hearts with great generosity; but when we walk on past, or when we decide to leave it all to someone else, or when we really don't expect much of our community, we become like the people of Nazareth; good people, no doubt, but because their expectations were so low in effect they blocked the power of God to work among them.

When God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel in today's first reading he says 'Whether they listen or not, this set of rebels shall know there is a prophet among them'. The prophet is not a hidden figure, or a silent one, the prophet is prominent and loud. And we have a prophetic role, too: we are to be prophets of a richer way of living. Looking at the late postmodern world, with its mixture of triumph and disaster, winners and losers, the powerful and the powerless, we are prophets with the message: there is a richer way of living, and we would like to invite you to explore it with us. If we don't believe that life within the Church, sheltered and nurtured within its loving embrace, is better than life outside it, then why would we be attractive to anyone else? If we don't believe it ourselves, why should they? Lets make sure the world knows there is a prophet among them, a prophetic voice that invites them to a richer life.

I would like to think that every one of us could think of ourselves as a prophet of a richer life, and a herald of hope. We do not come to Mass to help us just carry on living ordinary lives like everyone else; we come here because giving glory to God helps us to discover and experience the true hope of the world, which we can then share with the world.

So as we think about our mission as a parish community, we could perfectly well summarise it as living as heralds of hope. And as we try to think how our parish might work better in the future, we might each of us take away and pray about this summons: Lord, make me a Herald of Hope! When I spoke last week about all those aspects of parish life that need developing, all those places where we need volunteers to bring the parish to new life as we step out of the pandemic, in fact every one is a place where we need people to be heralds of hope. To be a welcoming community is to offer people hope of belonging; to nurture and instruct our children in faith is to give them hope of discovering a rich and fruitful way of living; to care for the sick is to offer them hope that they will not be abandoned, and that they are not forgotten just because they are no longer active among us; to keep our buildings safe and beautiful is to offer hope that the sign of God's presence among us is as lively as ever; to keep our finances on track is to offer the hope that the sweat of our brows can be put to use in making people's lives better; walking with the bereaved offers hope that loss and separation are not triumphant, accompanying couples preparing for marriage offers them hope that love really can triumph and give meaning to their lives; caring for the poor offers them hope of a fulfilled life – and offers us the hope that we are not powerless and we can make the lives of others better. And so the list goes on.

All of us are called to be Apostles and heralds of hope. There are so many ways in which we can look to do this and perhaps the beginning is very simple. Maybe we could each stop thinking of ourselves as a parishioner (which implies a passive and receptive sort of relationship to the rest of the parish) and think of ourselves as heralds of hope instead. Then we can properly ask ourselves, in what way is God inviting me to be a herald of hope in this place?

When the mother of the sons of Zebedee asks for them to sit beside Christ, and the rest of the Twelve become indignant at this, Jesus defuses the row by saying 'anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant' (Mt 20.26). Of course, in terms of the Christian life, greatness is expected of us all. No one sets out to be an ok sort of a Christian, aspiring to be average, any more than an athlete starts a career hoping to finish in the middle of the pack. To be a Christian is to be a servant. Our service to one another and to the world is as a herald of hope. Every one of us is called to serve, even the elderly and the housebound whose special service is to carry the rest of us in prayer. The transformation of parish life begins with accepting the call to be a herald of hope, and continues with the question: in what way can I serve?