

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 16th July 2023

Words, words, words. We live in a culture that is saturated with words: words on the radio, words on the television, words broadcast to us as we shop, words on our phone and computer screens, words in podcasts; as well as the old-fashioned words in newspapers, magazines and books. There are words everywhere. There always have been lots of words, of course, but in the past (such as the time of Jesus) they were almost exclusively the words that you heard someone speaking in your presence. Now things are very different. So, when we hear a parable about words, such as the parable of the sower, we are hearing it in a very different context to the one in which it was originally used. Words in the ancient world played a very different role in daily life to the role they play today.

So, as we read the explanation that Jesus gives to his disciples it still holds true, but we can usefully examine some examples from the world as we experience it in order to draw the deepest meaning out of it. The issue that Jesus was addressing was: why is it that the people of his day hear the word of God, in all its challenging, consoling, remarkable beauty, but it just seems to wash over them like water off a duck's back, and bears no fruit in how they live? It is to answer that question that Jesus tells the story; and the question is every bit as relevant today – more so, in fact. How can it be that the words of today's communion antiphon, for example (from Psalm 83) which tell so beautifully of the safety that even the weakest can find close to the altar of God, words which we find go straight to the heart if we really stop and chew them over in our minds, how is it that they seem to leave many unmoved?

Some seed fell on the edge of the path, and the birds came and ate them up. There are so many words in our lives, words that assault us and assail us, that tempt us and beguile us, and we are often completely ill-equipped to distinguish between the words that are life-giving – even, perhaps, life-changing, and fruitful on the one hand and those that are destructive, distracting, or just mere noise on the other. We have become used to not really letting any words into our minds, into our souls, and letting them sit there, because there are just so many words, and so we never give any of them more than the quickest glance and then we move on. We do not let any words sink in, so we do not let the word of God sink in. How can we become better at dividing the words we come across into two separate groups: the ones which are just noise, and those which need careful, serious thought and deep consideration?

Some seed fell on patches of rock, and sprang up straightaway, but quickly withered in the sun because there were no roots. These seeds do at least 'land' and begin to do what seeds are meant to do. So, the word of God does get through the wall of other words and settle within us. But it is still not going to bear any fruit. We hear these words, perhaps we even think 'that's nice', but while they sit on the surface of our minds, that is where they stay. They do not make the journey into our hearts where they can change our lives. Jesus did not come to speak lovely words that make us think 'How charming' and then carry on as we were: he came to help us see how our lives could be more authentic, more true, more real and seeing how this could be, he

gives us the tools to change. The seed that lands on stony ground is heard, and responded to (however minimally) but is not able to sink deeply enough to change us.

Some seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked it. These words are heard, as well, but they are choked by a thousand other competing words; we hear them, and perhaps we make good resolutions to act, to explore more deeply, but by the time we are home again so many other things crowd them out. It may indeed be the worries of this world or the lure of riches, but it may just as easily be some of that other noise that shouts so loudly for our attention. So many other plants have put down roots in the soil of our minds that the still small voice of calm cannot make itself heard. When the word of the Lord caused a little flutter within, and made us resolve to do something more about it, all seemed well, but there are unwatched programmes on the television, unchecked Instagram posts and whatsapp pings, news feeds demanding attention and pushy push notifications clogging up numbers on the screens of our phones, and so the best of intentions are forgotten. The seed of the word is forgotten, then, choked by other, noisier plants – often plants which, in fact, we have planted ourselves, little realising how vigorous and demanding they would become.

The word of God must compete, today, with so many other words. Often they are louder, more insistent, more demanding. We must work all the harder, then, to make space for the Word who is Life; we will need to protect some space, even just a few minutes each day, in which we can listen to the word, reflect on it, allow it to sink deep within our souls, and make resolutions about how we might let it change us. Of all the words that batter us each day, there are very few that matter much in the light of eternity. Some of them are fun, or harmless enough (and some, of course, do pose a risk to our souls, to our attempts to live a life that is noble, good and true). Very few matter in the light of eternity. These are the seeds that we need to make room for, tend to and encourage, because only then will they bear fruit in lives that are better and richer, more human and, therefore, more happy and fulfilled.