

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time (B)
Sunday June 20th 2021

Revisiting The Parish Vision

Evening falls on a busy day, when Jesus has been busy teaching beside the lake. There has been a long succession of days of teaching: by the lake, in homes, in the cornfields, in a synagogue, on the mountain, and now by the sea again. Clearly he is very tired. The story so far is a mixture of success and failure, of ups and downs. Some of the time the crowds listen to him and hang on his every word, but at other times the religious leaders turn against him and try to trap him. As he travels around with his friends, who are in a sense the little proto-church, sometimes all is good and exciting, and sometimes things look quite bleak. This has been the pattern ever since. Some times the Church is on a roll, all is going well and the spreading of the Good News is plain sailing, other times it can seem very hard work indeed. The little proto-church, Jesus and his closest friends, are in a small boat on a stormy lake. As they are tossed around like a little toy, threatened with disaster at any moment, the church looks very fragile indeed. The disciples are frightened for their lives, but also for his: what will happen to this glorious new movement if he is drowned? They discover, however, that all is well. They find here a revelation of the Church living out its mission in troubling times: there is nothing that they can do apart from turn to the Lord. They do not try and find their own way out of trouble, they just place themselves in his presence. And, exposing themselves to the presence of God, they are filled with awe. They learn once again that Jesus must be the centre, and his presence with them is awesome. This is good to know.

As we begin to think of what the Church in general, and our parish in particular, might look like after the lockdown, this is a good lesson for us to learn, too: Jesus must be the centre, and his presence with us is awesome. It is now some years since we had a long discussion across the whole parish about a vision of who we want to be, and the results of that we put into a sort of Vision Statement. As we look to building a new future I think it is worth looking at that again. It puts Jesus at the centre, and gathers us around him, as it should do. But it does challenge us to ask how we are going to make it happen, how we are going to make the dream a reality. Lets look at it again.

"We are striving to be followers of Christ, loving the Lord, loving his Church, and loving his world; committed to growing together in faith and friendship, and to serving one another and the world around us."

We are striving: it is a struggle. It is always easier just to drift, to react to things as they come along and hope that will be enough. But if we just react to things as they come along, we lose control of the direction that we are going in. If we are going to keep our eyes fixed on the awesome presence of Christ, and introducing others to that awesome presence, we will have to work hard to keep ourselves pointing in the right direction: reacting will not be enough, we will need to put our backs into it.

What are we striving to do? To be followers of Christ, to be disciples. A follower of Christ is someone who listens to what he says, watches what he does, and goes where he goes. We listen

to what he says – and for that, of course, we need to know the scriptures, and especially the Gospels. Even if we do nothing else in the way of spiritual disciplines, one thing we could do is read a short passage from the Gospels each day – perhaps as simple as the Gospel for Mass that day. This will also help us to watch what he does, to see how he responds to different people. And as we do that we will see where he goes: he goes to help the sick, to connect with the outcast and the rejected, but also to challenge the comfortable.

As we strive to be followers of Christ we love the Lord, we love his Church, and we love his world. These are important things. We could choose to follow the Lord out of curiosity, or out of interest, or just out of habit. But we know that these will not be very fruitful, because we can easily be distracted from them. So we follow him out of love. The more we learn about him, the more we discover him as one who is passionately committed to our good, our happiness, our fulfilment, then the more we know that we are loved by him; and knowing that we are loved by him we discover that we best respond to that experience of being loved by loving in return. Someone who cares so passionately and so precisely for us is, himself, both admirable and lovable. The more we know him, the more we love him.

Loving the Lord is profoundly human and rewarding: it draws out of us what we were always meant to be. But it is not enough because he has given us two places to encounter him: in his Church, and in his world. The Lord's Church can sometimes be very frustrating, or disappointing – but it can also be a place of startling delight and wonder. It is his family, the only place that we can meet the people that he has gathered together. It is bound to be a mixed bag, as it is a school for sinners and is full of all sorts of damaged and broken people. But it is the unique place where we encounter him in a special way, and in the middle of all the frustrations we hear here his voice in a way that is stronger and louder than anywhere else. And there is only one world in which we live, created by God as our home. We cannot say we love God if we do not also love the garden he has created for us as a home. A Catholic community will not only love the Lord, but also his Church, and also the world he has made for us and gifted to us.

To be a disciple is to be on the move. We cannot stand still, we need to keep moving, we need to expect to grow. Specifically we need to grow together, because our faith is a community faith, a faith lived together, a faith in which we all depend on one another. Our faith is the faith of a family, and a faith of friendship. The life of a disciple is one in which we want our friendship with the Lord to grow stronger, and as we each grow in friendship with him we grow as friends of one another too.

It might be tempting to look at our faith, our life in the church, as something that helps us, something from which we draw strength and support, and of course it is that, but it is also fundamentally about drawing us into friendship with the one who is, above all, one who serves. Jesus tells us “He who is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Mt 23.11) and so a parish community must also be a serving community: serving one another, and serving the people among whom we live.

How are we to move forward in a world which is so different from the one of two years ago? By renewing that vision which we captured a while back, and over the next couple of weeks we will examine a bit more closely what that might look like. But it isn't just for me, or for a few of us: if it is going to bear fruit, it is a task – a challenge and a joy – for us all.

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