

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Ordinary Sunday 16B
Sunday July 18th 2021

The scripture readings at Mass today set before us a contrast. On the one hand there are the scattered flock, ignored and mistreated by their shepherds, and the people who were living far apart, together with the people who have sought out Jesus, even travelling to a lonely place to be with him. On the other hand there is the promise of repose, restfulness, revival, truth, comfort and the proclamation of the Gospel of peace. There are the anxious, the fretful, the lost; and there is peace, restfulness and integrity. What is the bridge that allows people to cross from one place to the other?

When the disciples come back from their preaching and healing circuit, they are excited but tired. Jesus wants to take them away to a lonely place so that they can rest, but also so that they can reflect on what they have experienced. This is going to be an important time for them. But the people know what has been happening. They know what Jesus and his friends have been doing, they know that remarkable things have been happening, but they do not quite know what this means, where it will lead, how to access and harness this remarkable spiritual power. They know that there is something missing from the way that they are living, but they are not quite sure what. So they do something remarkable. They guess where Jesus is going (perhaps because retreating for rest in a lonely place has been a familiar thing that he has done before) and so they head him off there. When he arrives there, he sees a crowd already waiting for him. They are so desperate for some sort of spiritual leadership that they will even go to a remote spot, to put themselves in the way that he will pass.

In this story we can see one of the great keys to wisdom; the people instinctively know what to do. They are feeling anxious and uncertain, they are troubled and confused and so they put themselves in a place where they are sure that they will encounter the Lord. They know that he will pass by this place, and so that is where they go. In times of doubt, or confusion, or anxiety, they put themselves in a place where the Lord will pass, and they are rewarded with hearing the Gospel of Peace. All too often, when we are downhearted, or anxious, or uncertain, we rush around trying to invent some sort of answer, trying to sort it all out for ourselves, and this story shows us a deeper wisdom. The people who are troubled put themselves in the place where Christ will pass, and he rewards them with some true shepherding.

There is a lesson for us here. When we are anxious or unsure, we may well need to take some action, to do something, but the first thing to do is to put ourselves in the place where Christ will pass by. Then we can decide what we need to do, what actions we need to take – but only after we have made sure that the shadow of Christ falls across us as he passes by.

What does this mean in practice? How can we put ourselves in the place where he will pass by? First of all, of course, we are here at Mass. There is no better place where he can be

found. We don't really need to do very much apart from be here. We know that he will be passing. Just being here and being attentive is enough. We listen to the scriptures, and the words give us an entry into the heart of God. He invites us, in spending time close to him, to pause in a place of peace and repose. Whatever fears and anxieties assault our ordinary lives, this is a lonely place where he offers us rest. He speaks into our hearts the good news of peace, the truth that on a very profound level, all will be well. He receives our gifts, however meagre they may seem, but first of all, of course, our gifts of ourselves, and however conflicted and uncertain that gift may be he receives it with great awe and delight, offers it with his own gift of himself, and then gives it back a gift transformed for the life of the world. Here, at Mass, we place ourselves in a position where Christ passes by. He speaks his words; he gives us a guarantee of his presence; he shows us the power of a life based on gift of oneself; and he sends us out with new confidence and a new role, the role of ambassadors spreading the good news of peace.

What else can we do to put ourselves in a place where Christ will pass by? We read the scriptures carefully, and we find there his intoxicating words, words that speak deep into the human soul. We spend time together in prayer or in study – and we have learned so much more about this in the last few months as we have managed to pray together using the internet. We read spiritual books, or blogs, or listen to podcasts, all things that can open up for us the presence of God. There are so many things that we can do to put ourselves in the place where he will pass by. What will you do? What is your plan to put yourself in the place where he will be passing near? What resolution might you make this week that will put yourself in just the very best of places to encounter the living Lord, the one who speaks into your hearts the Gospel of Peace?