

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 17th September 2023

Today's second reading is one of the choices suggested for a funeral Mass. I think, really, this is because of the words 'alive or dead we belong to the Lord', but there is more to it than that. The opening words 'The life and death of each of us has its influence on others' is actually quite a good place to begin reflecting on our own mortality. It is both a challenge, and a statement of fact. It is a matter of fact that the way we choose to live has an effect on others. We might be grasping, selfish and shallow, and this will have one effect on the people around us; we might be generous, kind and thoughtful, and this will have a different effect. If we think that our actions, or even our thoughts, have no effect on others we are deluding ourselves. There is a stereotype that underlies our culture, a lone hero striding independently and autonomously across the world, creating his own destiny and owing nothing to others, but it is a fake. To try and live like this leaves a trail of destruction in its wake as the weakest go to the wall, and simply proves those opening words: if I try to live entirely independent of others, I do so only by squashing them. Only when I recognise that my life is inextricably entwined with countless others, that we depend on one another, can I find true freedom and happiness, and also live according to reality. My life does indeed, for good or ill, have an effect on others, as theirs do on me.

But, as well as a statement of fact, those opening words of the second reading are also a challenge. In particular, they are a challenge at the hour of our death. My life and my death do, indeed, have an influence on others – so, what has that influence been? Will it be written up in the Book of Life for good, or for ill? Has my life enriched others, made their lives more human, more fulfilled, more happy? Have I rejoiced with those who rejoice, and wept with those who weep? (Romans 12.15).

The road that leads us towards this question, this final encounter with the truth that our lives and deaths have their influence on others, is the path of Transformation in Christ. The goal of the spiritual life is to be transformed, little by little, painstakingly over many decades, more and more into the likeness of Christ. In the end, that is the only way in which we can have a truly positive impact on the lives of others – to present to them something of Christ, however much it might be hidden beneath our failures and our sins.

Today is Evangelii Gaudium Sunday – what was previously known as Home Mission Sunday, when we consider the Mission of the Church to present the love and mercy of God to the world. In the letter from which this Sunday takes its name, Pope Francis said this.

'Today, our challenge is not so much atheism as the need to respond adequately to many people's thirst for God, lest they try to satisfy it with alienating solutions or with a disembodied Jesus who demands nothing of us with regard to others. Unless these people find in the Church a spirituality which can offer healing and liberation, and fill them with life and peace, while at the same time summoning them to fraternal communion and missionary

fruitfulness, they will end up by being taken in by solutions which neither make life truly human nor give glory to God.' (Evangelii Gaudium n. 89)

There is indeed a thirst for God within every human being, because that is how God has made us. He has made us to have hearts that are restless until they find their rest in him (cf S. Augustine). For all sorts of reasons, people simply don't recognise that the sense that something is wrong for what it is – a thirst for God, a need that can only be satisfied by him – and so they look to other ways to overcome that sense that something is missing: they pursue pleasure, or wealth, or fame, or influence but none of these will bring them peace. In fact they do the opposite, they make us less human, less true, less real. As we set off in the wrong direction, looking for an answer to the sense that things are not as they should be (which in reality is a thirst for God) we find that every successive prize we pursue fails us, and this makes the sense of alienation worse.

So, knowing that every one of us is created with a thirst for God, a sense that without him nothing seems right, and also knowing that 'the life and death of each of us has its influence on others', we come to an inescapable conclusion. Our lives find their meaning according to how well we are able to help people to identify the thirst for God that lies within them and unsettles them. We must be honest and accept that the Church has not always done this well. We have, too often, come across as hectoring, or bossy, or holier-than-Thou, and this has had precisely the opposite effect – it has driven people away. It simply doesn't work to tell people what to do: it probably never did, but it certainly doesn't now. All we can do, in response to the Holy Father's challenge, is to say that we have felt within us a sense that all is not well, and that we have become convinced that this reflects a deep thirst for God, and the only way to quieten this sense of dissatisfaction has been, for us, to throw ourselves on the mercy of the Saviour. That is what we do, Sunday by Sunday, in the hope that this will slowly bring about our transformation in Christ, so that we can present his image to the world. That is all that we can do, but it is enough.