

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)
7th August 2022

'Happy those servants if he finds them ready...You too must stand ready' Today's Gospel passage is all about being ready. But ready for what? And what does being ready actually look like in practice?

Well, this passage is full of surprises, and so perhaps the first thing we must be ready for is, ready to be surprised by God. And following on from that, perhaps we need to allow ourselves to be used by God to surprise the world. The world that is tired, anxious, self-obsessed, often closed to deeper realities, needs to be woken up and told 'look again!'

So, what does the Lord mean when he seems to compare himself to a thief, breaking in at an unexpected hour? Is the one who saves us really like a thief, coming to steal our lives away? Its quite a shocking image at first, but it is meant as a goad to make us think. We have this strange idea that our lives are possessions of our own, something that we have grasped hold of and now cling to possessively; anyone who wants to prise our time, our will, our lives out of our grasp will seem to us like a thief – they are after what is mine! But in truth it is no thieving, because our lives are not our own to do with as we please, they are given to us by the creator for a very specific purpose: to be lived in a way that enriches the world and gives glory to God. Every time we are off going our own way, doing our own thing, pleasing ourselves, living as if we were at the centre of everything, he comes to nudge us back on the path of reality, nudges us back to being what we were created to be, and our immediate reaction is 'Stop, thief! This is my life' and only slowly, as we stop to think, stop to reflect, stop to pray, do we think actually, hang on, you are right. St Therese of Lisieux, in her final days as she waited for her life to end, waited to meet her Saviour, playfully subverted this image, playfully spoke of waiting for her beloved thief, waiting not to fight him off, but to embrace him: 'I was thinking I should be a dear and wait for the Thief very quietly' [Leiva-Merikakis Fire of Mercy, Heart of The World III p745]. Jesus will seem like a thief to us if we are still deluding ourselves into thinking our lives are our own to do with as we please; but if we can make that change of thinking that sees our lives as they really are, given to us to be used for the service of the world and the glorification of God he will be thief no longer, but pilot and guide.

As if that image were not surprise enough, what about the equally extraordinary image of him as a master who returns very late from a wedding feast, and finding his servants ready and waiting for him he sits them down and serves them. is that the right way round? He serves them, not them serving him? What can that mean?

I was listening to someone speaking the other day about attending a Mennonite wedding in Canada. Mennonites are a little bit like the Amish – a quite distinctive Protestant sect – and one thing he said about the wedding was very striking. Here is his description:

'The people serving the meal were the wedding party. The bride's father gave us our picnic basket. The bride's sister made the pulled pork sandwiches. The groom did the cole slaw. And at

the end of the line, the bride—who had put an apron on over her wedding dress—served the mac and cheese. The receiving line was turned into a service line.’ [Malcolm Gladwell ‘What I found at a Mennonite Wedding’].

There is something deeply attractive about this image. It turns completely on its head any question about who is the centre of attention, who is the most important person there – it is not the bride and groom, it is the guests that they have invited. Jesus says in Luke’s gospel ‘I am among you as one who serves’ (22.27) but, familiar as those words are, we can’t quite bring ourselves to take them to heart. We are still a bit addicted to status and self-promotion, but at the same time we know deep down this is no good, this is inhuman, this is not life-giving as it brings out all the worst features in all of us, and that is why we find the image of that wedding party serving up a simple meal on a lawn outside a church so enticing.

So what might Jesus mean when he says we must be people who stand ready?

He means we must be ready to be surprised by him. No matter how many years we have been listening to, and telling, these stories, they still have the power to surprise us if only we will open our minds and look again.

He means we must be ready to surprise the world, just as we have been surprised by God. When our hearts are broken open and we realise that the thief is really no thief at all, but instead is a pilot and a guide, what we have learned can be balm and medicine for an anxious world.

He means we must not put off ‘soul work’ to another day; not put off reforming ourselves, opening ourselves to change, not put off learning to love the thief. If there is something about our lives that needs to change, it needs to change today, there will be no better time.

He means we need to look and see who the steward chosen to run the house will be. It is the person faithful and wise enough to feed the people as they need it. The one at the head is the one who feeds, not the one who eats.

Do you think you know all there is to know about being a follower of Christ? Look again, there are still plenty of surprises. When we can allow him to surprise us joyfully, we will really have something to share with the world, to make them look again.