

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)
Sunday 12th September 2021

This Gospel passage is so rich, so beautifully crafted, such a great example of Jesus' natural skill as a teacher that we could spend weeks looking at it – but we won't! Maybe it would be a help for us to look at it in slow motion, because by doing that we can pick up on some of the details that might pass us by.

First of all, this is a conversation that happens on the road. As they are walking along, Jesus uses the time as an opportunity to teach. When he stops he is quickly surrounded by big crowds, or confronted by the Pharisees, so walking along with his disciples is a golden opportunity to speak with them about some of the deeper things, in this case to assess how well they are understanding what he has been teaching.

So, as Jesus and this smaller group walk along, he asks them who people say that he is. This is such a skilled piece of teaching. He wants to know how in touch they are with the people around them, but of course he really wants to know what these friends of his think, but he starts with this safe question to give them an easy way in: it will be easier for them to answer the next, really important question, if they have first answered this one – it will give them something to contrast themselves with. So, have they been listening to the people around them?

Yes, they have. The people around them are confused about who Jesus is. Some this, some that, some the other. People were confused then, and I suspect they still are. It would be interesting to know how people today would answer that question, and perhaps it points us the way to understanding our world better: maybe we would be better at sharing the good news with the world if we understood it better, if we were as good as those disciples at knowing what people think, who they think Jesus is. Do they think he is a prophet, or a preacher, or a revolutionary, or a wonder-worker? Have they simply never bothered to think about it at all? How do we overcome the perception that the Church is an organisation with lots of rules and practices and requirements in which Jesus may be found if you hunt hard enough, and share instead the idea that the Church is a group of people for whom following Jesus is the most important thing in life, people who gather round him to listen, to learn, to be fed, healed and forgiven, to travel with him on the road to Jerusalem – just like the image of today's Gospel, in fact?

Once he has found out what the disciples know about other people, he asks the really important question. What about them? The crowds are confused, but are they? Can they separate themselves from that jumble of confused ideas and come up with an answer that is clear, simple and accurate? Yes – well, Peter can at any rate. 'You are the Christ'. Jesus can breathe a sigh of relief, they have been listening, they have understood, at least the most important part. And so he explains to them a little more about what this means. To be the Saviour means to be vulnerable, to prefer weakness to strength, persuasion to force, love and forgiveness to violence. They had understood so much, but this is going too far: Peter grabs Jesus and stands in his way, blocking the road to Jerusalem. Never! This must not happen!

Peter has made a classic mistake. It's one that we all make, again and again, and it is one that Christians have been making from that day to this. Peter loves the Lord, he really loves him. Loving him, he wants what is best for him, and Peter is sure he knows what this is. Peter has a plan, an idea of what salvation might look like – or at least he has a very clear plan of what it will NOT look like, and he can't see beyond that. But it is God's plan, not Peter's, that matters. It is so very tempting for us to come up with an idea of who we would like Jesus to be: we know what we think he should be like, what we want him to be like, and from that we make the leap to concluding he just must be like that. And this Jesus who we have created in our minds turns out, of course, to like all the things we like, feel passionate about all the things we feel passionate about, and want us to do all the things we already want to do. The spiritual life, the life of the disciple, requires us to revisit again and again the territory around Caesarea Philippi, the scene of today's story and be reminded that we are called to love and follow Jesus as he really is, which is much more challenging than following him as we would like him to be.

Then Jesus looks and sees the disciples looking on: they have seen what has happened, perhaps they can even guess what Peter and Jesus have been talking about in this pretty physical confrontation. Jesus realises that he cannot let this pass, and so he rebukes Peter: Get behind me! Get behind me, Satan (that is, one who obstructs, who blocks, who opposes). Get behind me so that you are out of my way. BUT, it isn't stand aside, or move along, it is get behind me. Get behind me where you are out of my way, no longer standing between me and Jerusalem, but also, 'get behind me' so that you can follow me, this is the way for me, but also for you. Get back in line, leave your plan aside and follow God's plan. The difficult path is not to be avoided.

Peter has learned something new. Now he knows, as all the Lord's followers do, that the cross, which is the way of honesty, truth, faithfulness, and steadfast goodness, is the way of the cross and it is to be embraced, not avoided. The one who keeps their life safe, who never risks opposition, or failure, or danger; the one who never stands out from the crowd, never says or does anything challenging, will lead a life that is not lively at all, but stagnant. Kept safe from the world, it will never be harmed or challenged by it; but nor will it ever enrich, or challenge the world, never turn it up the right way again.