

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year B)
Sunday 19th September 2021

Autumn Message Series 'Catholic Identity'

Introduction And 'People on The Way'

In the world of today there is a great deal of discussion about identity: who am I? How do I know who I am, and how do I become it? Am I my profession: a banker, a teacher, a nurse – and if so what happens when I lose my job, or to those who have no job? Maybe I am defined by my nationality: but am I British, or English, or European – or all three, or none of them? What if I am a refugee and I have to flee my country – what does that do to my identity? Then there is the whole minefield of sex and gender: am I a man, a woman, neither, both? What a complicated world it can seem to be. In that complicated world I want to try and explore something a bit more concrete, a bit less fluid. I want to ask the question that a stranger coming into our church for the first time might ask: Who are these Catholics? What are they about, how does the Catholic mind work, in what ways are they different from other people? What is the unique gift that they bring to the world that makes it better and more authentic?

Perhaps we had better deal with one myth before we start. Somehow or another we have got into a fix where if I asked a random stranger what Catholics are about they would possibly say: they are against... I don't know abortion, divorce, doctor-controlled dying, casual sex, whatever, you fill in the blank. This is, we need to be clear, a caricature. Of course the Catholic is against some things – everybody is against some things, but only because they are in favour of something bigger and better. We are in favour of rich, fulfilling and life-giving sexual relationships so we are bound to be against anything less than that, for example. It is much more interesting to think about what we are for. That is always the case in any discussion – much more helpful and interesting to ask what the other person is for, not what they are against.

So, who are we, and what do we stand for? What is our identity? What is it that makes us able to say 'I am a Catholic and proud to be one'?

First of all, we are a people on the move, a People on the Way. We are, each one of us, so far from perfect, there is much changing and much growth to be done. The person that I am now is not the best person that I can be, but I want to get closer to it. Today's Gospel begins

with Jesus on the road with his disciples, teaching them, but we can see they still have a lot of growing to do. As he is telling them about his own humility, they are arguing about which of them is the greatest. Looking at that we can say 'Yes, they are certainly not there yet, they have so much growing still to do'. They realise it, too. They go silent when confronted, and they know they need to change, to leave behind this grasping at status.

The great Catholic writer Dietrich von Hildebrand gave a series of lectures, that later became a book, at the height of his struggle against the Nazis in the 1930s. The book is about the attitude of the Christian, so very much like this series of homilies. The very first thing he says about the Christian, the thing that marks the Christian out as a follower of Christ above all others, the thing the book deals with first of all, is this: *'The readiness to change is an essential aspect of the Christian's basic relation with God; it forms the core of our response to the merciful love of God...'*

A disciple is someone who follows a Master. They know that the Master knows more than they do, they know that they have much still to learn, and so they put themselves in a place to learn. Little by little, with the passage of time, the Master's ways become their ways. So the disciples who are now arguing on the road about who is the greatest will watch Jesus; they will see him live a life of generosity, and self-gift; of honesty and faithfulness and humility. And when the time comes they will no longer be wasting time arguing about greatness, they will have learned the Master's ways, and they will give their lives in the service of him and in doing as he did. They will have become so transformed that they can say, as St Paul said, *'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me'* (Galatians 2.20).

Only a person who believes that they are perfect will say 'I do not need to change'. No-one but a fool would really say this. If we stop and think about it we know we need to change in order to become more truly the people God created us to be, to become people who really are a blessing to the world around us. But, of course, not all change is the same. Some change makes us worse, makes us less of a blessing, less the people we were created to be. If I allow myself to be changed back to the man I was, back to the old ways that I thought had been defeated, this is no blessing at all. So the disciple develops a softness that allows them to live more and more the life of Christ, but also a hardness that resists the changes that would make them less human. This is not always easy to do, and there will be many false starts, many slips back down the slope. The essential question is: Do I want God to be at work in my life, changing and moulding me into the image of His Son? Some people may believe that they are fine as they are, that they have already reached perfection; others simply never think about it at all, but just go through life with the unspoken presumption that they are who they are and that is it. The people on the way, with the Catholic mind, are passionate about change, about being open to transformation, and this is the first part of our answer to the question 'Who are these Catholics?'. They are a people desperate to open themselves to the transforming power of God's mercy. Most people, if challenged, would not say they are perfect – but at the same time they trundle along through life making little room for growth, so in effect they act as if they thought themselves perfect – lets be honest, isn't that true of most of us? But that is not the Catholic way; we need to be passionate for change, looking out for ways that God can be at work in us, ways that we can plant our feet in the footsteps of the Master. Then, in truth, we will be disciples.