

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 1st October 2023

When we read the letters of St Paul, we are reading just one side of the correspondence. He writes these letters in response to some query that has been raised, some other letter that has been written to him, or some report that he has heard. By reading his words we can work out, to some extent, what issue he is trying to address. In today's second reading there is a truly heartfelt appeal: 'If our life in Christ means anything to you, if love can persuade at all...' This is clearly something very important, absolutely fundamental. And what is the nature of his plea? Be united in your love, have a common purpose and a common mind. Let there be no competition. It seems there must have been something rather unedifying going on, some disunity, some sense that the brothers and sisters were working against each other, not together. There has been some sort of competitiveness – trying to outdo one another in piety, perhaps, or wanting more attention, or more praise, than other people. We don't know exactly, but it is clearly something that St Paul has passionate feelings about.

What is the remedy that St Paul offers for competitiveness and disunity? This is an important question, because these two damaging attitudes will gnaw away at the church, as they do at every group and community. What answer does he have? To overcome competitiveness and disunity, he says the Philippians must begin by entering into the mind of Christ, seeing every situation as he might see it. And, because this sounds rather abstract, St Paul launches into one of the most sublime pieces of writing he will ever produce, his great hymn to humility.

When you are feeling hard-done-by, when you are feeling that someone else is getting more attention than you are, or you feel like going your own way and doing your own thing, just remember: Jesus was divine, but emptied himself, willingly taking on the position of a slave, not just becoming man but becoming the lowest of all men, humiliated, a nothing, a nobody. The remedy to competitiveness, to scrabbling for power, position, influence is the mind of Christ, a mind that is irrevocably set on moving downwards.

And this is not some artificial demand imposed on us to try and make us into something different. The reality is that the scrabbling upwards, the pursuit of power, influence, titles, possessions, does not address the spiritual thirst, the longing for something better, that lies within each one of us. They dress up as solutions, as food for the soul, as able to satisfy our thirst, but it is all a fake. It is not serving myself that brings fulfilment; it is serving other people. That is what real, authentic, human life looks like, and that is why it is also what the mind of Christ looks like.

It is not always easy to know how the Lord would respond to a specific situation. What would he do about this, or that? Sometimes our world can seem so very different to his, so developed and changed with new technological possibilities, that it is hard to know what to think. But the starting point must be the mind of Christ, a dynamic of serving other people, not serving myself. In fact, this is what lies behind the story that Jesus tells in the Gospel reading today as well. What

were they thinking, these two brothers? 'I will not go', one says. Perhaps he had other plans; perhaps he wanted a day of idle rest; perhaps he hates working in the vineyard; whatever lay behind it, his words come from the sense that what he himself wants trumps what his father wants. Only later does he have a chance to think, to reflect, and to realise that much as he might have wanted to do things to please himself, they would be hollow pleasures. He will sleep better that night for having done what his father needed, it will be a day well spent. His brother, however, glibly agrees to do as he is asked. What made him say 'yes'? Perhaps he really meant it – we all of us have an infinite capacity to delude ourselves, and so we sometimes say what we know is the right thing to say, although at some level we know we will never deliver it. Our easy responses that tell people what we know they want to hear are dangerous, because they do not reflect what is really going on within us. We give a clear and simple answer when, in reality, inside us there is a whole jumble of desires, intentions, hopes, fears and resentments that will take a great deal of unravelling. perhaps, however, he never really meant to go, he just said what he needed to say to get the old man of his back.

Whatever it was that made the two brothers speak as they did, what they do is governed by conformity with the mind of Christ. One of them realises that service of someone else is where authentic living lies, and acts accordingly; the other is overwhelmed by what he himself wants to do for himself, and it is on that basis that he acts. This tension exists within each of us. To some extent each one of us is both the first brother and the second.

These readings are not meant to make us pursue some sort of inhuman self-denial, some pathological preference for misery; but they are meant to make us reflect on something that will prove life-changing and, if universally accepted, world-changing. They are meant to set before us the primacy of the mind of Christ – that is our guide to authentic human living. And the mind of Christ relays to us a simple truth. Fulfilment, worthwhile living, is found in serving others. Serving ourselves, tempting as it might seem, however much it dangles before us sparkling prizes, is unsatisfying and unfulfilling, and powerless to bring us joy.