

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty-Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year B)
Sunday 26th September 2021

Autumn Message Series
'Catholic Identity'

'People of Character'

Last week I began to speak a little about 'Catholic Identity'. Who are we, us Catholics? And I reflected a little about discipleship as the willingness to be changed, changed into the likeness of the Master. The Catholic knows they need to be changed, and is prepared to work at enabling that to happen. Today I want to go a stage further and think about the Catholic as a person of character. This might need a bit of explaining. And, of course, much that I say will also apply to people outside the Church, but my specific interest is what makes the Catholic mind tick?

The starting point is the Collect of today's Mass. This prayer is addressed to God who 'manifest your mighty power above all by...' By what? You might think by slaying the wicked, or by creating, or destroying, or by great signs and wonders; but no, he shows his almighty power above all – more than anything else – by pardoning and showing mercy. So today, in answer to the question 'who are you, you Catholics' the response begins with 'we are people who know we need mercy, and we know where to find it'. The one who knows that they need mercy has access to a tool that allows them to be endlessly re-formed and re-shaped so that their character grows and expands. They want to pursue what is good, and flee from what is harmful. They know that, like every other human being, they were created in such a way that some things will enhance their lives, and in doing so will make them happier; other things will harm their lives, and make them less happy. If I think that I am the centre of the world and everyone else must revolve around me, that will make other people unhappy for obvious reasons but it will also make me unhappy, because it is inhuman to live like that and tempting as it is for a while it is deeply unsatisfying; there are many things that give us pleasure in the short term, but in the long term make us miserable. If I act as if I were the centre of the world it will poison all my relationships, because everyone around me will obviously be reluctant to join in that fantasy. And if *everyone* acts as if they were the centre of the world, any form of mutual relationship of trust and equality is impossible, there can only be fear and suspicion, suspicion that everyone else wants to unseat me from my place at the centre of the world.

The person of character knows that there are some things that might feel good today, might be fun or pleasure-giving, but in the long-term they will do harm, and they harm the people around too. And so, tempting as the glittering baubles may be, she turns away from them. There is one particular practice that will help to train the person of character, help to deepen their character, their resistance to the myth that the world revolves around them, and this practice is deeply ingrained into the Catholic identity. It is quite simple in itself, but

sometimes very hard in practice. It also stems from knowing that we need mercy and knowing where to find it. This golden token is generosity.

This is what Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke: *“give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”* (Luke 6.38) The measure you give is the measure you receive. There is something very important that we need to understand about generosity, and it goes against what our instinct tells us. Our mind tells us that generosity will leave us diminished. And you can see why that might be: If I have £20 in my wallet and I give £10 away, I have less cash than I did, and so it looks as if I am diminished, I have less. But is this really so? I might have less cash than I did, but am I worse off as a person, less of a person? If I have used that £10 to enrich the life of someone else isn't the world a little bit better, and so I am a little better off too? The same is true of time. If I have a free hour to do as I please, but I end up giving it to someone who calls me and really needs a chat, I look at my watch and the time is gone, I have less time. But am I really worse off? Aren't I, in a sense, richer because the person needed that time with me? It is a great lie that the Devil whispers to us that generosity will diminish us. It might mean that we lose something, but what we gain is greater – a full measure poured into our lap.

So the Catholic is a person of character, trained in the school of generosity, which is the way of life that we see Jesus living out again and again: tired and in need of a rest, he goes to care for the lost who look like sheep without a shepherd; and ultimately, he is generous to the end because he offers his whole life for our freedom. His whole life is a modelling of this fact: generosity expands us, not diminishes us. And in case we don't get the message, he models it for us every time we come to Mass. We give him bread and wine; he gives us himself. Every celebration of Mass is above all a celebration of gift, of receiving something infinitely precious: God himself; something costly to the giver (his precious life painfully taken from him on the cross) but given to the receivers (us) without cost.

The Catholic mind, moulded by this weekly experience, learns the habit of gift; this habit is what helps us to be people of character, people prepared to do difficult things, things that we may not want to do, because we know they are right. God is love, and his love manifests itself in generosity; if we hope to be his disciples, the same will be true of us.