

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty-Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time  
(Year B)  
Sunday October 10th 2021

## Autumn Message Series 'Catholic Identity'

### People of The Word

Today I want to return to my series of homilies about Catholic Identity: what do we stand for; how are our lives formed; what do we bring to discussions about culture and the nature of society; what unique insights do we have that can help to shape our world for the better.

Today I want to pick up the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews which was read earlier: 'The word of God is something alive and active'. As Catholics we are people of The Word. The scriptures are not, for us, a kind of manual which contains the answers to every question: it is Jesus Christ who carries the answer to every question, but the scriptures do reveal him to us in a unique way. If we do not know the scriptures, we will not know Christ – this is what St Jerome said: 'Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ'. The Catechism tells us that reading the scriptures is a part of what it means to be a Catholic. They are for us 'strength for [our] faith, food for our soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life' (CCC n 131).

What is so important about The Bible? Well, it is written by real people who were inspired by God in a unique way. They carry a guarantee of authenticity and truth that no other words carry. That is the theological answer, if you like, and it is powerful enough on its own. But there is a practical answer, too. The Scriptures, taken as a whole contain a multitude of little stories, but also they form, together, one great story. From beginning to end the Bible is, in fact one great love story. It is a story of how God loves the world into existence, and how his love sustains it still; it is the story of how he created humanity to care for and cherish that world, to be the stewards that would see it right and care for it; it is the story of how he chose one nation as his own people so that they could be a beacon of wisdom, hope and fidelity that would, in the end, inspire all peoples; it is a story of how the freedom that he had given his people was, time and again misused by them, how they rejected or manipulated or abused his love for their own gratification, and how they misused the freedom he had given them; it is the story of the prophets that he sent to rescue them, and how carelessly they had refused to listen; it is the story of how, in the end, he sent his Son to them to lead them back to a life of love and gift and gentleness and generosity, but again they preferred anger and violence to peace; it is, finally, a story of how this struggle will continue until the end of time, of how freedom will always be open to abusive acts of selfishness, as well as to the heights of heroic generosity, but that at the end of time love

and fidelity will triumph. It is a great story, that encompasses within it not just the whole of human life, but also the destiny of the whole of creation. And it is our story. We have a place in this story. It is not a tale of something that happened long ago and far away, it is the story of what is happening now. That struggle between violence and peace, love and selfishness, freedom and responsibility, that we read about in the scriptures is playing out still, now: in our world, in our country, in our towns, in our families, in our inner souls. To know the scriptures is to know our story, to know who we are, to understand the challenges and opportunities that life throws at us. Even if we get bogged down in one of the seemingly complex passages from the letters of St Paul, we need to remember that they were not written as works of theology, but as practical responses to specific questions that he was asked, questions that were caught up with that constant struggle between what is fulfilling and life-giving, and what is destructive and life-sapping.

Lets look for a moment at today's readings. The first, from the book of Wisdom, is about prizing wisdom. It is reminding us that while riches and splendour and power may open to us some new doors, only wisdom allows us to know what to do with them so that they build up the common good; it is all dust without wisdom to guide their use. This is a part of the great story. So is that reminder in Hebrews that the Word of God has great power, if we are receptive to it, power to open up our souls and to see reality as it truly is, cutting through our delusions and self-deception. And the Gospel passage is part of the great story too: it asks us to identify with that man, so full of energy and desperate excitement at the thought that he could find the answer to the biggest question of all that he runs and flings himself at Jesus' feet. He wants a straight answer, but the one that he gets throws him right into the midst of the struggle that runs through all the scriptures, the struggle between love of self and love of others, love of security and generosity. We are that man, and there are times when we, too, turn away sad because God has opened up to us facts about ourselves that we find uncomfortable.

There are lots of beautiful words and phrases in the scriptures, and they can be very inspiring to us. But it is the stories, both the little stories and the great story, that catch our imagination. One of the things that we take away from Mass is that we are reminded here of these stories. They are told to us again and again so that we cannot forget, and so that we remain a part of them, and they remain a part of us. Each one of us will for ever be that man who threw himself at the feet of Jesus, was received with great love, but found the challenge of facing reality almost too much to bear. Jesus loves him, and holds up a mirror for him, and the young man finds what he sees very problematic. Hearing this story again challenges us, and that is why it is good that we hear it. The repetition of these stories keeps alive in us the glorious vision of people truly alive. The moment we slip away from this, we begin to lose contact with who we are. These stories matter; they make the people who make the Church which in turn humanises the world.