

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty Ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 29<sup>th</sup> October 2023

Every time we come to Mass, we begin with a penitential rite. This is more than just a form of words to be recited, this is a vital expression of truth before we even dare to listen to the word of God. The words may be so familiar that they trip off our tongues without thought, but it is worth us stopping for a moment to reflect on what we are doing. Our assembly is complete, we are all here but before we even listen to the word of God we need to unstop our ears, to open them, unblock them, remove everything that stops us hearing clearly. So we begin with a heartfelt cry: 'Everything is messed up; the beauty has been soiled, the order and pattern have been muddled and confused, the harmony has turned to discord. It is all messed up, and has turned ugly, and it is partly my fault and I can't put it all back together again – I cannot see straight and I cannot hear much that's worth hearing at all.' That is the penitential rite; and God responds with great tenderness: 'I will make all things new, I will put things back together again, I will put you back together again, so that you are ready to hear and understand, to see and truly perceive.' This is glory indeed, and so we sing, and we sit and listen, able to hear at last.

Confessing to God that everything is a mess and we cannot sort it out, he responds to our cry for help this day with the story of a meeting between Jesus and some followers of the Pharisees. These men approach Jesus full of praise and smarmy compliments; but they are completely hollow. 'We know that you don't look at externals, we know you don't change what you say according to the looks of the person listening, we know that fine clothes and high rank mean nothing to you...' They want to trick him into some rebellious comment, something that is either irreligious or undermines the Romans. But they have totally misunderstood him. He does indeed not see the face of the person speaking, he sees their hearts, and in this case those hearts are rotten and diseased, eaten away with malice. In fact he does tailor what he says according to who is listening – he tells each person what they need to hear (which is very different from those people who tell people what they want to hear). He punctures all that pompous flattery with something very practical: 'Just show me a coin'. Fine, the coin bears Caesar's image, it is marked as his possession so fine, give it back to him. BUT, and here they get much more than they bargained for; BUT give to God what belongs to God – you are marked with his image as much as the coin is marked with Caesar's. Everything is a mess because we too easily allow ourselves to get carried away with our own prejudices; we try to make the world around us fit into our ideas, our scheme, our pattern, just as the Pharisees tried to squeeze Jesus into theirs. Don't you like living in a world that's a mess? Then give to God what belongs to God. Don't try and force him into a pattern that you have created, that always leads to a mess; don't try and use God to justify your prejudices; don't create God in your image, making him as much like you as possible – it is supposed to work the other way around.

Everything is in a mess. Indeed it is, and to some extent since Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden it always has been. We carry within us a nostalgia for Eden, for a place where everything is not in a mess, and thank God we do. This is one of the great gifts that people of faith carry with them, the gift of seeing that the world is a mess, and understanding why this is so. We so easily

are tempted to say 'Everything would be alright if only everyone else was more like me' – you may smile, but it really is so. History is littered with well-intentioned people who tried to force everyone else to see the world their way, and only ended up messing it up even more.

Isaiah speaks words of prophecy today, the words of the Lord for Cyrus, the King of Persia: you do not know me, but I have a plan for you, a plan to remind the people of Israel and the nations around them of something they must never forget, from the rising of the sun to its setting: 'Apart from me, **all** is **nothing**'. Too easily we go off in search of 'all' – something that will satisfy us, will fulfil us, will make us feel that all is well, and it can seem tantalisingly close, almost within our grasp. BUT, but, 'all' is not 'all'; in reality, apart from God, it is nothing, it dissolves to dust as we grasp it and we are left, once again, crying out that everything is messed up and we don't know how to put it together again.

We come to Mass to remind ourselves, week by week, that apart from God 'all' is not 'all', it is nothing. We hear him gently forgiving us and we see that we have been looking for 'all'; in the wrong places in this past week, and we need to try again. We see that generosity and gift is the heart of the nature of God – as he gives us himself, weak and fragile at every Mass, helpless as a newborn child – and we will mess things up again this week, but not as much as if we did not carry this memory within us, a memory stirred up time and again with the words 'This is my body...'

We will certainly mess things up again this week; but Thank God we have at least a chance of seeing where we are going wrong, and a clue about how to put them back together again.