

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)
23rd October 2022

The first reading today describes for us what God is like. It is not, of course, possible to give a comprehensive description of God, he is always going to be bigger, more interesting, more challenging, than we can ever imagine, so any attempt to describe him is always going to be 'he's a bit like...' Today, we hear, he is a bit like a judge who is completely impartial, interested only in what a person is like and who they are becoming, not interested in wealth, or rank, or status. He will listen to everyone in exactly the same way, for example he will listen to the poor widow – the epitome of the powerless and vulnerable in that world – as she pours out her story.

The pouring out of stories is very much a part of what it means to be human. For every one of us, it is a wonderful thing to find someone who will listen to our story: someone who will not judge, will not try and impose themselves, will not keep interrupting or setting the boundaries for what we want to say, but will simply let us pour out our story. This, of course, is what we do when we pray: we pour out our stories, all the things that have gone well that we are pleased about, all the things that have gone badly that we are sorry about, all the needs, the longings, the hopes, the sorrows that are at the forefront of our minds – all the people we are fearful for, and all the people we rejoice for, all the stories that criss-cross over with ours on this day.

In fact, this is what the Pharisee and the tax collector are doing in the Gospel reading. The Pharisee pours out his story: he tells a tale of someone rather pleased with himself, rather content that all is well, someone who has looked around and decided that he is rather better than the people around him, someone who really feels he needs nothing but to carry on as he is. This is his story. The tax collector tells a different tale. His story is a rather sorry one. He has precious few friends to listen to him. He collaborates with the occupying power to collect taxes from his own people to hand over to them (and, if he is like many of the tax collectors, creams off a little something for himself, too). No-one trusts him, and everyone keeps their distance from him. There are very few ears open to hear his story, and perhaps that is why he is there in the Temple. The Pharisee is apparently there to pray, but in fact he is really talking to his favourite person (himself) about his favourite person (also himself). For the Pharisee God is really a mirror image of himself, and so he cannot see any challenge in God. For the tax collector it is very different. For him, his story is one of weakness, of failure and of need, but also of confidence, because he knows that he is being challenged by God, and he knows that with God's help that challenge can be met. The Pharisee is very happy with the story he tells about himself, and so he leaves the Temple unchanged. The tax collector is devastated at the failure he sees in his story, and so he will leave the Temple transformed. He has found one who will listen to his story, help him break it down, reassemble it in the right order, and set him on his feet again. The Pharisee's story is a lonely one, because he wants no-one in it but himself; the tax collector's story is a lively and life-giving one, because his story crashes into the story of God's mercy and the power and the energy of that crash is transformative. What a remarkably powerful thing it can be, this telling of stories.

I was in the Cathedral yesterday for the visit of the relics of St Bernadette, and Bishop Richard spoke movingly about St Bernadette, this poor, sick, ill-educated girl who was blessed to see glimpses of eternity in the apparitions of Mary, and of Bernadette's simple but steadfast fidelity to telling the story. She didn't try to put a spin on it, or explain what it meant, or interpret it or theologise about it – all that was for other people, but she simply insisted on telling people what had happened. She told and re-told how Mary had ushered God into her life and changed it. That was it, nothing added, nothing changed, just plain story-telling, but a story-telling that would not be silenced. And today is World Mission Sunday, the day when we pray for and support the Church's task of telling the story of God's love all over the world. That is what mission is, that is what missionaries do: they listen to the stories that people tell; they tell the story of Jesus Christ; and they help people see the ways in which their stories and the story of Jesus collide, and merge, and walk side-by-side.

The disciples of Christ are a people of story. We tell our stories to God, honestly and without spin, with nothing missed out because we know that he will listen with great compassion and mercy, and that it is always his will to set us free from the power of past failures and mistakes. We are a people who take very seriously the stories of others. We listen to what they have to say, without judgement, and we try to see in those stories the places that God can intervene to help. We often see in those stories shadows and reflections of other stories, of an ancient wisdom that will help us lead the sorrowful into freedom. We are a people who cannot stop ourselves from telling the story of the love that God has for his creation, and above all for humanity, made in his own image and likeness.

So, standing at the door of the Temple, looking in and seeing the Pharisee and the tax collector, do we have the courage to tell our own stories to God with the honesty of the tax collector? Will we become people whose ears can become like the ear of God, able to listen, to honour, and to reverence the stories of others? Will we be like Bernadette, like every missionary, people who cannot stop themselves from telling the story of Jesus Christ whose love transforms, enlivens, and heals?