

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)  
29<sup>th</sup> January 2023

The prophet Zephaniah is looking to a time when the nation is renewed. Its salvation will not lie in the hands of the rich and powerful – in fact they were the ones who got it in to a mess in the first place. No, its future lies with the humble and the lowly; their trademark will be that they do no wrong, and they tell no lies. There is something really important here, I think, namely the connection between doing wrong and telling lies. It is not just that telling lies is a part of doing wrong – that much is obvious. More important than this, I think, is the fact that one of the reasons we do wrong, act badly, hurt ourselves and one another, is because of the lies that we tell: specifically, because of the lies that we tell ourselves.

If we go back to the beginning, back to the Book of Genesis, we see the power of the lie. The serpent lies to Eve; and she internalises that lie, believes it, re-tells it to herself, and then tells it to Adam, too. It is that lie which turns the world on its head, and opens a catalogue of human misery. God tells Adam and Eve the truth: the world has been created in a specific way, and human beings have a specific place in that ordered world; if they act as if this were not the case, they will hurt themselves, hurt one another, and damage the world. The Devil says 'No, it is not so, you can do as you please, all that matters is that you create yourself as you wish to be, follow your dream, and pursue happiness'.

The Devil's lie is a compelling one, because it tells us exactly what we wish to hear, at least on some level. And so we repeat the lie to ourselves, and to each other, until it becomes almost universally accepted. There may be a few inconvenient voices speaking out against it, but they can be shamed or bullied into silence. And suddenly the lie is the norm. The culture that we live in has become very susceptible to the Devil's lies. There is so much that is good about the world in which we are at home, even about the culture that we live in, but it also embodies fatal flaws. As it has divorced itself from the ancient moral vision of Judaism and Christianity it has become vulnerable to untruth. No longer able to tell the truth from falsehood, it has often settled on falsehood because it is easier, less demanding, and offers short-term pleasure, which is often so much more compelling than long-term happiness.

So, what are the lies that we tell ourselves – the lies that, as Zephaniah recognised are far from harmless? It is difficult to know where to start. Lets start with some of the fundamental lies, from which the many secondary falsehoods flow.

*There is no such thing as truth; there is no such thing as right and wrong.* This is a great falsehood. Obviously it's a fake – if there is no such thing as truth, the statement itself is not true, and that makes no sense. We all know, deep down, that some things are wrong and others are right because we see how some actions bring joy and others bring misery. It is tempting to believe there is no such thing as right and wrong because it allows us to do as we please, but if we go just a little deeper we will see that it actually becomes a terrible burden. If there is no such thing as right and wrong we must constantly decide for ourselves what is right in any given situation; and we are always a victim of our passions, our unruly desires, which quickly enslave us because, before we know where we are, we are overwhelmed by desire which persuades us that

the right thing to do is, in fact exactly what we want to do anyway because it will satisfy our longing for instant pleasure.

*Everybody is doing it, so it doesn't matter.* Probably not everybody is doing it, in fact – we have surrounded ourselves by like-minded people who have already persuaded themselves that 'it' (whatever it may be) doesn't matter – we just don't come across the people who are not doing 'it' because we are avoiding their company. Anyway, even if everybody were doing 'it', it is a lie to believe it doesn't matter. As long as I hold out the battle is not lost, and not everyone is doing it. If it is wrong, and adds on some level to the stock of unhappiness in the world, my resistance to the lie brings life to the world.

*Nobody will know, nobody is harmed by it.* Again, it doesn't matter if people know, this action will change me and I will behave differently towards other people because of it. If something is wrong it is also damaging, even if only slightly damaging, and it diminishes me, and makes me less able to transform the world. No wrong act is so small or so private that it does not diminish me and harm my relationships with the world around me.

*Guilt is a bad thing, I refuse to be made to feel guilty for what I do.* Is guilt really a bad thing? Isn't guilt just a sort of soul-pain – it tells you when your soul is being damaged as surely as a feeling of burning on your hand tells you that you have touched something hot. Guilt, like pain, tells us action is needed to avoid further damage. Guilt tells me I have done something wrong and must act (this is not the same as shame, of course; guilt says 'you did something bad'; shame says 'you are a bad person', and this is, indeed destructive and inhuman).

*Rules are unhealthy and limiting, we should trade them in for freedom.* We can see that this is a lie of course – if there were no rules there would be no games, for example. But we want to believe the lie because, again, it would allow us to do exactly what we want to. But we are in thrall to our passions – greed, lust, envy, the will to power or to acquire or to be adored, and so when we abandon the rules that protect us from these passions and keep us safe from them we become slaves to them instead. It was Edmund Burke who said 'It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.'

There are so many lies floating around in our rootless culture, whispered into our ears by the Devil, the father of lies. From these great lies flow all the lesser ones: you need to buy more; you are too old to be of any value – or too young, too ugly, too large, too small, whatever; you are a failure, so you are worthless; you will be a failure, because you have failed in the past; you will be forgotten; you are irrelevant. Have you noticed that all these lies, that we often hear and even end up internalising and telling ourselves, simply miss the point about human life. They are based on the great lies, and so they have nothing to say about real human living. The question that helps us to unmask the untruths is this: 'What sort of person are you becoming?' All the Devil's lies are designed to keep us from asking this question and living with it. No wonder: it is the antidote to his falsehood.