

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) 28<sup>th</sup> January 2023

In today's Gospel passage Jesus takes his disciples with him to Capernaum - the newly-called disciples, that is, their feet are almost still wet from the lakeside, where they were called away from their boats to become fishers of men. He takes them with him to Capernaum, and there they get their first experience of Jesus in action. What they see and hear astonishes them. These disciples have already realised that in Jesus there is something new and extraordinary - if not, they wouldn't have followed him in the first place. They have seen that in him there is something magnetic, something which, once seen, you can never quite shake off, something which caused them to walk away from their familiar lives for something much more uncertain: now they experience something more astonishing still, they experience teaching with authority.

This tells us something about the teaching of Jesus, of course. It also tells us something about the other teachers that are around at the same time, teachers who clearly lack authority. But its also worth noting that this story tells us something about the newly-called disciples, and about the others present in the synagogue that day. All of them were able to recognise teaching with authority when they saw it. They were able to see that here is something new, and here is something electrifying, unusual but at the same time deeply attractive. Whatever problems there may have been among the religious leaders of the time, the lamp of faith has not completely gone out. There is still faith in Israel, there are still people who can tell the difference between a wolf and a shepherd, people whose souls can be captivated by something truly remarkable. This is the basis on which the Lord will set about building up the Kingdom of God: the remnant, the people whose minds and hearts are still in tune with God's wisdom, God's truth, God's love.

Perhaps, as they listened to Jesus teaching, they remembered the story that we have heard from the Old Testament. Moses' time is drawing short; the people, who have wandered so long in exile, are soon going to enter the Promised Land. But Moses knows that this Promised Land, rich and fertile as it may be, is also full of danger. The people who live there see the world very differently to the people of Israel. Their values, actions, and beliefs are all very different. If they want to know what to do, the existing people of that land consult witches, magicians, oracles and soothsayers. But for the people of Israel this will not do - when they need guidance and help, when they need to know what is good and true, when they need to know how to act, magicians and oracles are no good to them, they need to know what God wants. So in the first passage we heard read today, the people on the verge of the Promised Land are being given a safeguard to protect them from the pagan ways: they are being given prophets to keep them in touch with God's will, so that they will not be tempted to go to the witches and the soothsayers. The culture that they will be moving in will be strong, and beguiling, but they are being given something better.

The situation of the people preparing to enter the Promised Land is not unfamiliar. Like them, we live in a culture whose values are often very different from our own. Like them, it is very tempting to be seduced by the way of the world around us: this was to be a constant battle for

the people of Israel, this struggle to remain true to their own values when surrounded by so many others, and the struggle continues still. I was listening to someone this week describing many toxic aspects of modern culture - greed, materialism, over-sexualisation, the cult of youth and beauty, the inability to hear any opinions other than your own, to name but a few, as being part of the air we breathe<sup>i</sup>. We breathe them in every day, like breathing in second-hand smoke, we cannot help it - but we will inevitably be changed by it unless we put up some defences. We cannot just hope it will not affect us - it will, unless we are on our guard. This was precisely why the people of Israel needed prophets - to say to them 'you are losing your way, you are becoming just like the people around you, you are throwing away everything that makes you special and different: turn back'. The People of Israel needed prophets: men who were reluctant to speak, who made nothing out of the process, who told people unpopular things that they didn't want to hear, and often paid a high price for it. The people of Jesus' day needed someone who spoke with authority: that is to say, someone whose words were not meant to impress, or to please, or to charm anyone - to win favour with no-one but God. They needed someone who doesn't expect them to listen simply because he has some title, or position, but whose words and actions find their authority in the fact that they always stem from humility, service and love. This is not some rich person telling poor people how to live; not some powerful person telling the powerless how to live; this is a man who has made himself poor and powerless showing people how to find meaning and value even in such a life as this. That is where his authority comes from - he has chosen to live as one who has nothing, and in doing so is able to offer others everything that matters.

The theologian Romano Guardini once wrote:

*"Jesus' entire existence is the translation of power into humility"* (Quoted by Pope Benedict, Angelus Address 29<sup>th</sup> January 2012)

It is in that humility that he finds his power and his authority, and that is what wins over the people in Capernaum.

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<sup>i</sup> John Mark Comer on Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast episode 626