

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)
February 6th 2022

Simon Peter has a life-changing meeting with Christ in today's Gospel. He hears Jesus speak to the crowd; he responds to the challenge to go out again fishing, after a completely fruitless night, when he must have been longing for some rest; he is overwhelmed by the catch; he drops to his knees. This is all just too much for him. He is just a fisherman, a simple man following a dangerous and demanding trade. What he has heard and what he has seen is just too much. 'I am a sinful man, this is more than I can process, this is more than I deserve, leave me and take this somewhere more deserving'. There is an echo here of something from eight centuries before. Isaiah, too, was a simple man, and one day he was at worship in the Temple when the barrier between that holy place and the heavenly place that it symbolised melted away, just for a moment. Isaiah glimpsed the reality that lies behind the symbol, and he too sinks to his knees, overwhelmed by his own unworthiness.

In both cases God's response is the same. There is a job to be done, you are the person to do it, and we will set the past behind us. Jesus comes very specifically and clearly to do away with the idea that God is only for holy people. It is not just holy people who have a role to play in sharing the Good News with the world. In fact, you couldn't get much holier than St Paul, he was almost obsessive about his religious observance, but that didn't stop him, much to his shame, getting it all hopelessly wrong and actually trying to silence the sharing of the Good News. It is worth repeating this: God is not just for holy people. None of us are prisoners of our past. However much we may have got it wrong in the past, a new and brighter future is only three words away. "I am sorry".

Peter throws himself on the ground at the Lord's feet and says "I am a sinful man". But Jesus knows that he is something much more than that. Peter has undervalued himself. He is not, any longer a sinful man, he is a repentant sinner, and this is something very different. A repentant sinner is someone who knows themselves, sees that there are things they have done that are wrong, and makes no bones about it: I should not have done these things, there was no excuse, it was my fault, and I am sorry. That is repentance, and it is the precondition to mature and honest human living. A sinful man, one who is full of sin, is a person who does not believe they ever do anything wrong, or who may acknowledge that they have made some bad choices, but says it is not their fault. Ironically, the only really sinful people are the ones who say they have no sin at all. C S Lewis writes about the difference between making excuses and asking for forgiveness when he says that often we say we are asking for forgiveness when in fact what we are doing is asking God to accept our excuses: 'I didn't mean it, I couldn't help it, I was not to blame.' But if I was not to blame, there is nothing to forgive. We shouldn't confuse making excuses for asking for forgiveness. We must never think that giving God some excuses that we find convincing is the same as repenting. There is none of that in St Peter; there is none of that in Isaiah; and there is certainly none of that in St Paul. Here is C S Lewis: "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you" ('On Forgiveness').

So, the theme that runs through today's readings is that God is not just for holy people, if by holy people we mean those who live apparently virtuous lives. God is for the repentant sinner, who may or may not appear to live a virtuous life, but whose life will usually look like a jumble of the good and the bad, the admirable and the repellent. We are not the prisoners of the people that we once were, of the choices that we once made. God sometimes chooses people with apparently virtuous lives to be his agents, but sometimes, in fact more often, he chooses very ordinary people who have the golden attribute that unlocks the power to change the world: they will make no excuses, they will take responsibility for their bad choices, they choose to be repentant sinners, not sinful people. Isaiah was a simple farmer, a man not outstanding in virtue any more than St Peter, the simple fisherman; St Paul was spiritual and learned, but until his moment of crisis he was a sinful man, only becoming a repentant sinner on the road to Damascus.

Each of us has the chance to change the world; each of us has a role to play in making the place where we live a little bit more like Heaven; none of us are prisoners of our past, of the decisions we once made. The starting point is very simple, the first step is the same for all, whatever direction subsequent steps may be. It is the change from sinful person to repentant sinner; making that change is the key that unlocks the future: it makes the clouds clear for Isaiah in the Temple; it lifts St Paul from the dirt by the Damascus road, and raises Peter from his knees by the lake. Excuses cannot set us free, but forgiveness can, and then the world lies at our feet.