

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) 11th February 2024

In the Opening Prayer of today's Mass we prayed that '*we may be so fashioned by God's grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you*'. That is pretty good description of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ: putting ourselves in the places where he will pass by, putting ourselves in the places where we will meet him, where his shadow will fall across us; getting out of the way and dropping our resistance, our self-obsession, so that he can be free to mould us into something more authentic, more human, more real. That is the goal of the spiritual life, but it is also the point of the season of Lent. In Lent we respond to the voice of the prophet who calls out: "You have forgotten who you are! You have forgotten what you were created to be! You have stopped turning into the person God has dreamed you might become and settled for something less!" And hearing that voice we respond 'My goodness, yes I have, I have completely taken my eye off the one thing that really matters, I mustn't put it off a day longer, a moment longer, I must do something'. And when we have heard that prophet's cry, and responded in that way, we are ready to begin Lent.

Lent is a time for us to have an honest reappraisal of our lives, to ask what sort of people we are becoming, and to examine whether the sort of people we are becoming really ties in with who we want to be. If we want to be the best person we can be - what people sometimes call the best version of myself - is that what is really happening? Looking back a year, say, until last Lent, have I become more loving? Have I become more generous? Have I become more forgiving? Have I, in short, become more like the model of what a human was created to be, Jesus Christ himself? I imagine that all of us would say, this has not gone as well as it might. For some of us there might have been some real victories, some real triumphs in this, but how many of us would be able to say we have made this the focus of our lives in the last year, and all is going according to plan?

We need to do something. But the good news is, while we do need to do something, we don't need to do everything. We don't need to make ourselves holy - in fact we can't, so it's a waste of time to even try: but we can put ourselves in the right place for God to start to mould us and form us, and that is what Lent is about. But where do we begin? We know we need to do something to get our life project of becoming the people God dreamed we might become back on track, but what?

Here is one insight that is obvious when you think about it, but it's a trap that we all tend to fall into. We think to ourselves that we are not doing well enough, so we must try harder. But trying harder is not going to work, unless we direct all that effort very carefully. If I decide that I want to run a marathon (implausible, I know) and think that if I buy the right shoes and set off running, trying really, really, hard I will be able to do it, I am a fool¹. To be able to run a marathon I would need to set out on a long and carefully crafted training programme that would help me to

¹ I took this example, and indeed the idea for this homily, from John Mark Comer's excellent recent book 'Practicing the Way'.

become a person for whom running a marathon would now be possible. I would need to try hard, but on its own that would not be enough. So if I decide I will just try harder to be more holy, then I am doomed to fail. Instead I need to do those things that will allow God to get to work on me, so that he can slowly help me to become a person for whom some measure of holiness is possible.

There are some tried and tested practises that we can take on this Lent (and maybe even stick with for ever) that will help us with this. The point of these practises is to disrupt our self-obsession, our pursuit of trivial things of no worth, and set us on a more rewarding path. We may think that we are in control of our lives, but as long as we think that we are in reality easy prey for unseen forces at work on us. Our digital world is exciting and stimulating and opens up for us all sorts of opportunities to learn, but do not forget that some of the world's brightest minds are being given unimaginably large budgets to find ways of taking control of your life: what you read, what you buy, what you think, how you spend your time. Your attention is a commodity, and it is being bought and sold - but there is no profit in it for you. The best of us, the most careful of us, will still probably say that we are not completely in control of our digital lives. It is so easy to fill our spare moments with a bit of screen time, but it can also be dangerous. There is the danger that we take in stuff that is bad for us - maybe not directly corrupting, but tending to make us covetous, or lustful, or proud, or resentful, or angry, or self-righteous; but, just as bad, every moment we waste on trivia is a moment that could have been well-used, lost forever.

So, the spiritual practises of Lent: prayer, fasting, almsgiving, but also confession, service of our neighbour, reading the scriptures, or reading other spiritual works, talking about the faith with friends (and strangers), these are all meant to disrupt our routine, and make us ask if we are giving our best attention, the best part of our day, to the things that really matter to us. I am certainly not, and I would guess, to different degrees, the same is true of all of us.

I am going to talk a little bit more about this over the next couple of Sundays. Don't worry if that means you don't get started before Wednesday (although do, if you can). We can do this, together. In fact, the pursuit of discipleship is one of those things that is best done together.