

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for the Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)
13th February 2022

Today is a day of contrasts in the scripture readings. What if Christ is raised from the dead, and what if he is not? Those who are happy, or Blessed (that is to say those for whom all is fundamentally well, those who are moving gently towards God) as against those for whom, alas, their certainties and comforts are built on sand. Those who put their trust in man, and those who put their trust in the Lord. Jeremiah is saying much the same as the Lord says in the Gospel, and in doing so he presents us with two important questions: what does it mean to 'put your trust in' something or someone? And where do I put my trust?

The more you stop and think about this question, the more it opens up all sorts of interesting levels of meaning. Trust is something that our society has increasing trouble with. Much of internet culture, and much of the media agenda, is based on taking people down, on criticising their supposed failures. This, it seems, is what gets people fired up and gets them clicking. It is little wonder that postmodern humanity has a problem with trust. When surveys are done they tend to equate trust and truth. So, asked if you trust people to tell you the truth 94% say yes, if the person in question is a nurse – but only 19% if the person in question is a politician (IPSOS Veracity index 2021) 60% of people trust the people around them, 40% don't (ibid). Is this what Jeremiah means when he talks about 'putting your trust in...'? To a certain extent, yes. Jeremiah isn't talking about individual questions, will this person tell me the truth in answer to a question I ask them. He is saying, where do you look for your fundamental narrative about what it means to be human, your fundamental narrative about what matters and what doesn't, about the consequences of any particular actions? What is the narrative, the story, about the meaning of human life that you believe accords with reality?

So, some people put their trust in man, in the things of the flesh. This means that for them reality is purely physical. What feels good, is good. If acquiring wealth, possessing things, controlling the people and the world around you feels good, go for it. If it makes you feel better to have people think you are marvellous, well tell them that you are. If you disagree with other people and it makes you feel good to pull them down, then go on, scramble as hard as you can for the top of the heap. Why settle for discomfort? If the fundamental narrative by which I live my life is about achieving as much as I can now, about acquiring as much as I can, about the primacy of enjoyment and being loved and admired by as many as possible, well if that is the case I will have fallen foul of every single one of the 'Alas' that the Lord mentions. Reluctant as we may be to admit it, there is something of this in every one of us. There is something that cannot quite let go of the idea, the story, that tells us these are the places where success lies. We know, of course, in our minds that this is all a lie, that these are fake gods that tempt us over the threshold into the Promised Land... until we discover, beyond the threshold, that we are not in the Promised Land at all but need to travel a little further, to cross just one more threshold...but there we find the same, and the story repeats itself until we wake up.

Pope Francis is very clear about this (Homily in Domus Sanctae Marthae 05/03/2015). Worldliness, putting our trust in the security that comes from possessions, or the pursuit of pleasure, or to be thought well of, he says is a sickness. It is a sign that we are unwell, that we are diseased. This is so interesting, he says it is more like a disease than it is like sin. This really matters, because sin requires repentance whereas disease requires healing. Worldliness is a sickness that leads us into sin. So, if I tell people what they want to hear so that they will tell me how wonderful I am, I need to repent of the sin of flattery, but on its own that is not enough. It leaves the disease untreated, the disease of worldliness. I need a cure to the disease that led me into sin in the first place.

So, to put my trust in something or someone is to adopt a particular narrative about life and its meaning on the basis that this accords with reality. If I truly believe that what matters most in life is to be well-thought of, then I put my trust in my reputation and act in a way that promotes and defends that. If I think that my pleasure, what makes me feel good, is the fundamental goal of my life, the reality of what life is about, then I will act accordingly. If I believe that material comfort and ease is the central goal of life, then I will act accordingly. This is putting my trust in man. But putting my trust in God, which is what we would all like to think we were doing, requires us to live by a different narrative. It requires us to seek fulfilment in self-giving, not self-promotion. It requires us to identify ourselves very closely with the needs of those around us who are starved of love, or attention, or justice, or respect. It requires us to define ourselves, our worth and our value, our place in the world, on the basis of what is lacking in us, not on what we possess. It requires us to prioritise truth over popularity, and this can be difficult because truth and popularity have a very uncomfortable relationship with one another.

What is the story that you tell yourself about what matters in life? What is the story you tell yourself about what it means to be a human-being fully alive? What is the story you tell yourself about how to prioritise your time and energy? Where have you put your trust?