

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year A) 21st May 2023

Reading through the Gospels, there are a number of questions that are asked repeatedly. One of them is a question that Jesus asks a variety of people: What do you want? When two of John's disciples begin to follow Jesus, he asks them 'What do you want?'; they answer him, rather enigmatically 'Where do you live?' (John 1.38). When James and John come to Jesus and say that they want to ask him a favour, he replies 'What do you want me to do for you?' – the answer is that they want to sit in positions of honour, one on his right and one on his left (Mk 10.35-6). As Jesus leaves Jericho there is some shouting and some shushing as blind Bartimaeus calls out to him for pity, and Jesus stops to ask him 'What do you want me to do for you?' (Mk 10.46ff).

'What do you want?' This question, which we might imagine Jesus addressing to each one of us as he passes by, is very revealing. It is worth spending a little time asking ourselves what it is that we want from him. As Jesus passing by pauses beside us and asks the question, how might we respond?

The psalmist is in no doubt about his answer to the question. There is just one thing that he will ask of the Lord, just one thing that he longs for: *'to live in the house of the Lord all the days of his life; to savour the sweetness of the Lord; to behold his temple'*. This reminds me of the story of Solomon shortly after he inherits the throne of his father, King David. The Lord appears to Solomon in a dream and asks him: 'What do you want me to give you?' and Solomon doesn't reply 'riches' or 'the destruction of my enemies' or 'a long life', he asks instead for wisdom, for an understanding mind to tell good from evil. Again the question 'what do you want' is very revealing, and here it reveals that Solomon is in fact already well on the way to wisdom. The psalmist might also have cried out for riches or long life or success, but he doesn't. None of those is the one thing that he wants. The one thing that rules his hearts desire is the longing to live in the house for ever; not to be a visitor there, however frequent, but to be a resident. That is where he wants to set up his tent.

What does this mean, to live in the house of the Lord all the days of our life? It can't mean that we are to move into the church, any more than the psalmist was going to move into the Temple. The psalm which we heard this morning continues *'Of you my heart has spoken: 'seek his face''*. To live in the house of the Lord means, I think, to keep alive and active within our minds, whatever we are doing, the encounter with the Living God. We are lucky that we can stand physically, actually, really before the altar and know that here lies the deep mystery of the presence of God. Here he is, truly present. He is unseen, but more real and more true than anything we can see, or touch, or hear. Here is the reality that goes beyond time – but yet is so easily forgotten. While I am here, standing at the altar in the church, it is so easy to remember, so easy to keep him in mind: but I leave the building and am caught up in shopping, or cooking, or working, or visiting friends and so quickly I forget, so quickly I find myself living as if God did not exist. Like Peter at the sound of the cock crowing I suddenly remember and am embarrassed, but it will not be long before I forget again. The psalmist has a deep desire not to be like this. He feels a great frustration at these lapses into 'practical atheism' – that is, living life for the most part as

if God did not exist, and you can feel the passion in his words. There is one thing he asks, just one thing he longs for: to dwell in the house of the Lord all his days. He is longing to take with him, wherever he goes, the sense that he is living in the presence of the living God. He longs for the sense that he carries with him always the aroma of the divine, so that however far he may be physically from the Temple, spiritually he remains there at the feet of God.

What is it that we ask of God? How would we respond to the Lord's question 'What do you want?' The psalmist leads the way. Of all the things that we might ask for, the one that really sings is to seek the face of God, to be able to carry his presence with us wherever we go, to live as if each moment of every day is lived at the feet of the divine. Our Sunday Mass was never intended to be a brief visit to the presence of God that buoys us up while it lasts but quickly fades; it was always intended that it should be a boost that reminds us that we live each day in his presence. It is one thing to know with our minds that he is close to us in everything we do. It is quite another thing to act as if we really believe that. So today let us make our own the prayer of the psalmist:

*'There is one thing I ask of the Lord,
for this I long,
to live in the house of the Lord,
all the days of my life'.*