

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)
27th February 2022

Ash Wednesday, and the disciplines that we take on for the whole of Lent, always disrupt and disturb us. That is exactly what they are meant to do. This year we are, perhaps, more vulnerable to disruption than normal. The peace of Europe, which we have taken for granted for so long, has been shattered and although the fighting and destruction are still, as yet, a long way away from us, we cannot help thinking that there is no peace anywhere in Europe now. It is utterly bewildering to us that violent men can choose to sacrifice so much in order to achieve so little. And so, no longer at peace, we look on and weep.

So, even before Lent begins, we are disturbed and the certainties that we hoped were beginning to return after the pandemic have turned out to be illusions. This year, as we wait patiently in line to receive ashes on Wednesday, we already feel cast adrift once more, and uncertain.

The ashes we receive this Wednesday, the sad remains of last year's palm branches, are intended to remind us that life is short and fragile. We are dust, and will return to dust, and the time between dust and dust is brief; the opportunities we have to make room in the world for the peace, and love, and gentleness, and freedom and healing of Christ are not to be taken for granted, for the years pass at speed. Marked with ashes we are marked with mortality, and on this day above all it is not possible to forget this. We do not see the ashes on our own heads, of course, but we see them on the heads of others: our friends, our neighbours, people we had no idea were Christians, our parents, children, husband, wife, and we cannot then bury ourselves in that illusion that so many people choose, the illusion that if we just don't think about it death will leave us alone. Today we cannot forget.

As we wear our ashes on Wednesday, though, they will take on a new depth of meaning this year. As we put on our ashes as a symbol of mortality, the ash blowing across Ukraine will be much more than a symbol: it will be the concrete manifestation of a nation at risk of annihilation, a people at risk of slavery, buildings and fields destroyed, lives snuffed out, violence and raw power at play in the garden of God's creation. And so this year we see a new truth about the ashes we will wear on Wednesday. They remain a symbol of our fragility; they remain a symbol of the shortness of life and the foolishness of putting off yet again a choice to live life for real and leave behind the shadows. But the ashes of a nation under tyranny add a new level of meaning to our palm ashes. This year they will remind us of how easily we turn the hopes and wishes of others to ashes. My cruel word or careless silence can turn another person's self-belief to ashes; my greed or obsession with my own comfort turns the needs of others to ash; my gossip or my speedy choice to judge carbonises someone's reputation; my self-absorption, my failure really to think how my life affects other people, leaves fields of ash where there might have been fruitful growth. The ashes we see on one another's heads help us to see very clearly how it is that our weakness can turn branches of rejoicing to the ashes of mourning.

So when the author of Ecclesiasticus says that in a shaken sieve the rubbish is left behind, he catches for a moment the meaning of Lent. Lent is about allowing the sieves of our lives to be shaken. It is about allowing everything we normally take for granted to be shaken up so that the rubbish can become clearer and we can throw it aside. Our fasting shows us how much we have come to depend on just satisfying our bodily cravings at will, when not far off 10% of the world's population go to bed hungry every night (although, of course, even that statement is misleading as many of them will have no bed to sleep in). Our abstaining from meat will force us to think about what we eat and where it comes from. The money we give away will show us how much we have fallen for the lie that who you are depends on what you possess and reawaken in us the dormant joy of bringing life to others. The extra time we give to prayer will disturb our routines, and as we baulk at a few minutes each day spent with God, will make us realise how much of each day we simply waste on pointless and fife-sapping nonsense. The time spent preparing for confession will first show us how anaesthetised we have become to our own bad decisions, as we struggle to think what we want to confess, and if we get beyond that stage it shocks us as we see how far we have drifted from the people that we had hoped to be. Lent is meant to disrupt us – not just a day of disruption then back to normal, but a whole season so that the sense of being shaken out of our complacency will be hard ignore.

The psalm today summons us to be planted in the house of the Lord, so that we can flourish, and once we flourish we will begin to bear fruit: planted, flourishing and fruitful, that's the challenge. It all starts with ashes, the ashes of reality and truthfulness in a world in love with illusion. What will you do this Lent to make sure that you are firmly planted in the house of the Lord, the place where he lives, the place where he is at home? Planted there, will you recognise the flickering signs of a flourishing human life within you, a life that is authentic and satisfying at the deepest level? And will you then be able to bear fruit, the fruit of a life that brings life to the people around you? It is an opportune time, the best of times, to choose life; a time that is disturbing but rewarding. If we throw ourselves into this and allow the sieve to be shaken the psalmist's hope might come true and leave us all planted, flourishing and fruitful. So lets do this thing, this Lent, together. Lets make ashes into palms, when so much of humanity is set upon doing exactly the opposite.