

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year A) 7<sup>th</sup> May 2023

*"A king today is the victim of his people; he is sacrificed to their continual demand for his public appearance, pelted to death with their garlands."*

Those words come from a homily of Mgr Ronald Knox at the last coronation of a king, in 1937. But they are even truer now than they were 86 years ago. The sovereign as the victim of his people seems strange at first, but the coronation ceremony seems to make this very clear. He is stripped of his splendid clothes, pushed from pillar to post, strapped into new clothes, weighed down with orb and sceptre and with a heavy crown so that he can barely move unaided. All of that coronation bling that looks so splendid and glitzy and sparkly when you see it locked away in the Tower of London looks very different spread out on the altar in Westminster Abbey – almost like the tools of a torturer's trade. If we were tempted to think of those jewels as like the decorative necklaces of the rich and famous, we misunderstand them. They are the very opposite of 'look at me glamour'. They symbolise instead the heavy weight of expectations that lie on the shoulders of the sovereign. Even in a constitutional monarchy such as ours, the burden that he must bear is a heavy one. He sits in a chair first sat in by Edward 1<sup>st</sup>, and is anointed with a spoon first used for Richard 1<sup>st</sup> not to make him think what a splendid and important chap he is, but to remind him that it is the role that matters, not the personality of whoever happens to be fulfilling it at that moment. All of those robes and items of regalia are designed to hide his personality, just like the sacred vestments a priest wears are designed to hide his. The king, like the priest, is the victim of his people, and the coronation ceremony is the solemn imposition of a burden, the laying of a cross upon his shoulders, not at all the adoration that celebrities aspire to. In a sense it is the very denial of the culture of celebrity.

But what might we hope for from our king? I think we might hope that the Gospel reading we have just read takes root in his heart, and becomes a light to guide him. When Jesus says to his disciples 'Do not let your heart be troubled' he is performing his kingly role. The task of a sovereign is to reassure their people, to be a presence that calms and encourages. With him in place, we can feel secure. Elected leaders come and go, and must court popularity to achieve power, but kings and queens do not labour under such a disadvantage. They do not need to buy our votes, and so we can trust them not to tailor their actions to woo the voter. They can be a reliable and trustworthy presence, a sign that there is someone who we can rely on, someone who cares for the ordinary people. So we can hope that our king will be able to say to us all 'Do not let your hearts be troubled', and lead us and show us a way of living that is reassuring and fruitful.

But we could also hope that he will take to heart the words that Jesus speaks to Thomas, when Thomas says he does not know where Jesus is going – so how can he know the way? 'I am the way' says Jesus: in fact, more than that, not only am I the way, I am also the truth and I am indeed also the life. We can reasonably ask, then, that the king will follow the way of Christ, find in him the truth that sets us free, and experience in him the life that bears abundant fruit. So, as well as praying for our king, that he is given the wisdom and the strength that he will need to live

the rest of his life as the servant – even, it will sometimes seem, the victim – of his people, we might pray that he will see clearly the way of Christ and follow it; the truth of Christ, and proclaim it; and the eternal life of Christ, and embrace it. These three gifts the Lord offers his disciples are not offered as alternative possibilities – pick which one you want. They are all bound up inextricably together. You cannot have one without the other. He asks them to find in him the way – in fact it is the only way – to a truly fulfilled and fruitful life; and in following that way they will find themselves rubbing along each day with eternal truths about what it means to be human, truths which will sometimes be surprising and sometimes challenging, but which are always life-giving; and as they follow the way, and plunge deeper into truth, they will also find they come to life in a way that puts them in touch with the life of the saints in Heaven.

The coronation of King Charles, then, is a reminder that no-one is an absolute master; all of us live according to the pattern that Christ demonstrated for us, we cannot rewrite human nature. The truth is that sacrifice and service lie at the heart of fruitful human living, and if His Majesty looked a little like a victim being offered for his people on Saturday, then so much the better for us all. It will not be an easy road for him, but let us pray that it will be for him the regal way – and that he will stay true to it and, in doing so, experience the first stirrings of eternal life.