

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year C) 15<sup>th</sup> May 2022

Today's Gospel takes us back for a flying visit to the upper room on Holy Thursday, at the last supper. The feet have been washed; the betrayer has left to hand Jesus over; time is short, the soldiers will be looking for him soon. It is the moment for one last throw of the dice, one last address to his friends. It will be a long and rich address, because there is a lot to be said to them and not very much time, but in this passage we hear the beginning of it. And it begins with a new commandment. We know, as did the eleven remaining in the room with him at the time about the Ten Commandments; we know, too about the other, lesser commandments of the Jewish Law. But what can there be to add to all this? What might this New Commandment be? 'Love one another'. Surely this is nothing new? There is more: Love one another – *as I have loved you*. The commandment is to carry out this loving not just in the old and familiar ways, but to model it on the way that Jesus has loved.

And what is this new way of loving that Jesus has shown them? Is it just to love *more* than anyone else has – in which case how can we possibly follow that? No, not really. For most of us, love is based on likeness. We find it much easier to love people who are very like us than people who are very different from us – who often scare us and make us feel vulnerable and defensive. We look at what someone is, at what they have been, what they have done, and decide on the basis of that whether or not we can love them. For Jesus there is a different starting point. For Jesus it is not what a person has been in the past that matters; it is not even what they have done that matters. For him what matters is what they might become, and what they might achieve. Of course he sees the person as they are, the sum total of what they have been and what they have done. But very quickly his mind passes over that and he sees what they might still become. They have been weak, and foolish, occasionally selfish and proud, but Oh just think what they might still become! Just think what achievements are within their grasp! St Peter has been impetuous and spoken without thinking; he has even tempted Jesus away from his path of faithfulness; he has been slow to understand, and he is teetering on the brink of denial, but Oh just look at the apostle he could be! Look at the confident preaching, look at the tender healing, look at the decisive leadership, the potential is so great. This is what Jesus sees in him, and this is what Jesus loves him for.

So when Jesus gives his followers a new commandment, to love as he has loved them, this is what he means. He is saying to them, do not only look at what a person is, or what they have been, look at what they might yet become, see within them the potential that they have, the potential to change the world, at least their little corner of the world, try and catch some glimpse of what God dreams for them, and then you will begin to be able to fulfil this command.

But there is, in fact, more to it than this. Seeing what a person might become, seeing the potential within them, seeing the ways in which they are uniquely gifted and the opportunities they have to grow and to expand as a person – seeing that and loving them for that potential actually helps it come to fruition. When you see the potential that someone has, and love them, you not only see what they could become, you help them to become it. Once again, St Peter

stands as an example. Jesus knew his flaws and his failings, of course, but he could also see the potential that lay within. He persevered in loving him, despite the failures and the infuriating faults, and because he saw the potential and loved him, the potential came into being.

When Jesus looks at each of us, of course he sees the sinner. But he quickly skates over that because he also sees the sinner transformed, the sinner redeemed, the sinner triumphant over temptation, the sinner who is able to enrich the lives of others because he has known failure and grown beyond it. When he looks at each of us he sees what a mess we have made of things, of course he does; but he sees first of all and most strongly the person we might yet become.

So the new commandment of today's Gospel is a commandment to love as Jesus did. To see people differently – in fact, to see them as we hope they might see us. We hope that people will not see the failure and the mistakes and the foolishness, the impatience and the snappiness, we hope they will see what we might yet become. Imagine what the world might be like if this caught on? In fact, let's set our sights lower than that, just imagine what the world might be like if just the followers of Jesus Christ, the people to whom he originally spoke this commandment, actually put it into effect.