

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year A) 14<sup>th</sup> May 2023

The First Letter of St Peter is sometimes regarded as a Baptism Homily that has been repurposed as a letter. Whether or not that is the case, it is definitely true that it contains advice for the newly baptised, for people becoming accustomed to living as Christians in a world that was largely unfamiliar with that way of living. They are experiencing a certain level of rejection, harassment, criticism because they are no longer joining in the sort of behaviour that is commonplace all around them. They hold back from the way of the crowd, from the priorities of the mass of people. In doing this they set themselves apart as different, and by making themselves noticeable and standing out from the crowd they attract criticism and, more than criticism, they attract hostility. They are discovering quite quickly that the way of the disciple is not always easy. So what should they do?

St Peter begins at the beginning: 'Reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts'. This is quite difficult for us to visualise, to make real in our minds. He is saying to them that the fundamental attitude that guides all they do should be one of adoration. Whatever we are doing externally, whatever tasks we are performing, conversations we are having, plans we are making, the adoration of Christ as Lord should never be far below the surface. If we want a visual image, we might think of Moses and the burning bush. Seeing in the bush that burns brightly but is not consumed the presence of God, Moses removes his shoes and hides his face. This is something extraordinary, quite out of the normal experience of things, and so Moses approaches barefoot and bashful. He does that because he sees before him something that is not just brighter, and stronger, and more beautiful than everything else in his world: it is *totally different* from everything else in his world. There is the Living God, and there is everything else. Moses sees in that burning bush that God is not just one thing among many in his world; the living God is the one thing that is of absolute value, and then there is everything else.

So, when St Peter writes this letter (which may originally have been a homily) he is trying to help new disciples understand how to cope with living as friends of Christ in a world that is not friendly to him – that does not understand, or does not care about, or does not like their way of life. Start, he says, with a simple truth. Stand in awe each day at Christ who is enthroned as Lord in your hearts. When they go to work each day, then do not forget as you make decisions and make choices, who is Lord in your heart; when they are enjoying themselves with their friends, remember the same; when they are at home with their families, remember the same. And this remembering is not a sort of furtive look at a stern and disapproving figure, it is much more interesting than that. It is 'Wow, this is beautiful, this is special, this is better than I would have dared to hope'. To reverence Christ as Lord in their hearts is to be reminded, time and time again, that life can be so much better, so much more full of hope, and challenge, and delight and wonder than they would ever imagine. So the way that St Peter puts before them to help them cope with a world that does not understand, or does not believe, is to protect absolutely and without question the place within where God abides: not to let anyone or anything unseat him from his throne within.

In many ways, the world that we inhabit is not so different from the one those first disciples lived in. It can be very hard for us to live Christian lives in a culture that has set its heart on different values. But the advice of St Peter stands: this is not really a clash of cultures, one set of values against another. It is about who, or what, we stand before in awe. Will it be comfort, or pleasure, or material goods, or technology? Or will it be Jesus Christ? And the danger for us – as it was for the disciples who Peter first addressed – is that if we do not stand in awe of Christ as Lord, it will end up being one of the others. Because we are created to worship, we need to choose what will be the object of our worship: if it is not God, it will be something else, whether we can see that or not. So St Peter's first piece of advice to new followers of God is very simple. Every day, do what Moses did. Stand barefoot and awestruck in the presence of the Living God. That is the way to survive in a world that does not share your values: to remind yourself each day that God is not just one thing among many in the world, he is on a different level from everything else. The Magi didn't travel half way across the world just out of interest to look into a possible new hobby, they were entranced by something greater than everything they had ever known, and that is why they travelled, and why they fell to their knees before him. Rather like the first disciples, we live in a world that does not know or value the Lord Jesus Christ. It would be very easy to get caught up in that way of living, so that we end up acting as if he did not exist. The key to surviving that danger is found in the First Letter of St Peter: always – every day – reverence Christ as Lord, and stand, barefoot and wondering, in awe before him.