

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year C) 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2022

As we read the Gospel today, five weeks after celebrating Easter, it is worth reminding ourselves of the context. These words of Jesus were spoken at the Last Supper. The agony in the garden, his arrest, his trial, his mocking, humiliation and crucifixion, these are all just hours away. And it is in this context that Jesus says something remarkable to his friends: *'Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you'*. He is about to undergo a painful wrestle with the Father's will in Gethsemane, about to lose his freedom and his life; one of his closest friends is already on the way to betray him, another will deny him, and all of them will run away, and he is talking about peace?

I don't think this is a coincidence. Jesus knows that if he talks to his friends about the gift of peace in the good times, when the crowds are flocking to listen to him, everyone is speaking well of him, and they can walk happily undisturbed through the countryside that, will seem very natural and unchallenging, there will not be anything very demanding about talking of the gift of peace when life is peaceful. But to talk about the gift of peace when life is being upended by violence, betrayal, desertion – that makes them, and us, stop and think.

As the disciples looked back on the tumultuous events of Holy Week, these words must have stuck in their minds. The reason that last week's, this week's and next week's Sunday Gospel readings all come from the supper on Holy Thursday is, I think, to get us to join the disciples in looking back, looking back at what Jesus said that night in the light of what happened later. And as we look at this puzzling talk of peace just as chaos, darkness and despair are about to strike can only mean one thing. It can only mean that, left to our own devices, we will end up looking for peace in all the wrong places. Blaise Pascal wrote *'All humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone'* and we could spend a lot of time thinking about that (in fact that is rather the point of the comment), but I think you could also say *'All the problems of the world stem from people looking for peace in the wrong places'*.

We all want peace. That is, we all want the sense that all is well, that there is no threat to our happiness, no anxiety, no fear, no doubts or confusion, no danger of loss: life is the best that it can be, and nothing can happen to disturb that. This is written into our human nature – and it is not surprising because this longing for peace is, in fact, a longing for Heaven. That is the place where everything will make sense, our state of mind is stable and secure, there is no threat of disturbance or loss. We all want peace, because we all want to live in Heaven (even if we don't actually realise it). But because we are fallen human beings prone to idolatry, to fixing our sights on pretty sparkly objects rather than on their creator, we end up looking for peace in the wrong places. Jesus speaks these words on the night before his death very deliberately, to say to his friends that they need to be ready to find peace in different places: if they look for security in things that other people can destroy or take from them, they will never know peace. Their fear and misery stem from looking for peace in the wrong places.

So much human misery flows from looking for peace in the wrong places. Violence often stems from a misguided search for peace. I perceive you as a threat – either because I fear you may attack me, or because I fear that your way of living will undermine my own and expose it as shallow and self-indulgent, or I fear that you are challenging me to change the way I see the world, and so I feel I must destroy you, or at least disarm you and render you unable to be a threat to me. But in attacking you I destroy your peace, and render myself even more unable to find it because there will always be someone who seems a threat to me; and in addition I have made you my enemy, and however complete my triumph over you, the fear will never completely leave me. I have looked for peace in the wrong place.

Or I feel that peace is found in familiarity, in doing exactly what we have always done. I feel threatened by anything that challenges this, so nothing must change, everything must be preserved. But this is as absurd as thinking that I will find peace if I keep changing things, as if by trying a thousand different ways of living I will, by chance, stumble onto the one that brings me peace. Resisting any change is as dangerous an idol as insisting on constant change.

Or I feel I must amass enough possessions, enough money, enough food, to make sure that I will always be comfortable whatever happens. But I am robbing the poor, stealing their peace, while failing to find it myself. How much is enough to feel secure? To be on the safe side I need just a little more, and a little more, and a little more. I destroy the peace of the poor whose misery grows deeper, but I also fail to find it for myself because I am as afraid of losing it all as I ever was, and I need to invest more and more energy into defending what I have. I have sought peace in the wrong places, and it has simply spread the misery wider.

In a hundred different ways, we look for peace in gaining power – being stronger, richer, better resourced than anyone else. But this is doomed to failure because we are never completely safe, and we know this. Strangely, if you want to find someone who seems to possess peace it is not the powerful, but the voluntary poor, who have achieved it. St Francis has nothing to lose, and so he fears no-one.

So much human misery stems from looking for peace in the wrong places. Come to me, says the Lord, come to me and live close to me, let me make my home with you, alongside you, let me into your life. It will not make things easy, it will not take away all the trials or the sadness or the pain. It will not mean you are always comfortable. But it will mean that you will have something that is both priceless and safe. No-one can take from you your friendship with Jesus Christ. And, so simple as it may sound but so hard as it may be to take to heart, that is the only place that we can really find peace.