

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

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

The entrance antiphon for today's Mass includes the words: 'Of you my heart has spoken: Seek his face; hide not your face from me, alleluia!' What can it mean for us to seek the face of God? How can we look upon the face of God? In these days after the Ascension, when we think of the bodily Jesus withdrawing from the sight of his disciples, we might ask ourselves, is his face now withdrawn from our sight, is it now hidden?

We might begin with some words that Jesus spoke to Philip at the Last Supper: 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (Jn 14.9). If we want to see the face of the Father, we are far more fortunate than the psalmist was, because we need look no further than Christ. If we want to know what God's love looks like, or his compassion, or his sorrow, of his challenge, or his summons or even his disappointment, we need only look at the face of Christ.

Do you want to know what the face of God looks like? It is a face lined with compassion. Jesus looks up into the tree where Zacchaeus is and sees a man who is deeply flawed but is also longing for something better, longing for someone to see beyond the title 'tax collector' and see the real man, with all his needs and weaknesses and longings, and in the upturned face of Christ he finds just that; he sees the face of God. So does the woman caught in the act of committing adultery – after the embarrassed and angry crowds have melted away the Lord looks up at her from his place kneeling on the ground, loves her and forgives her; she, too, has looked on the face of God. Mary and Martha see the face of God when Jesus stands outside their brother's tomb with tears streaming down his face: the face of God is smudged with tears at the suffering we must endure. And so does the rich young man, who has kept all the commandments from his earliest youth – Jesus looks at him and loves him, and that love contains a challenge as well, so that the young man finds that gazing on the face of God can be uncomfortable, too.

In fact the face of God is often a mixture of compassion and challenge. As the time of Christ's death draws close he predicts that Peter will betray him; and when he does, and the cock crows, and Peter realises what he has done, his eyes meet those of Jesus and Peter sees the face of God and he sees on it, locked together, a deep compassion for the sadness Peter must feel at his betrayal at the same time as a challenge, a challenge to pick himself up again and be a better man.

'Seek his face'. The face of God is a face of compassion, as we see time and time again in the Gospels. We do not need to guess what God's face looks like, we know: it is lined with compassion and smudged with tears.

But this is a face which carries a whole range of meanings. It can also be a face that is marked with deep frustration, frustration at the foolishness by which we do so much damage to ourselves and to each other. Just occasionally this frustration flashes across the face of Jesus Christ, as he reveals to us the face of God. The money changers' tables in the Temple must be thrown over. His face is even marked with anger at the coldness, the hardness, of the hearts of those who forbid healing on the Sabbath, who would rather a man suffer than the Sabbath be

broken. How could they so badly abuse the Law of God, to turn it into an excuse for suffering? (Mk 3.5). The face of God can be frightening for the wrongdoer, as from it flashes a glance of deep frustration at our failures.

The face of God is also often turned to us, in a softer way, to summon us to some great thing. It calls us higher, it opens for us the chance of something greater. Jesus looks at Simon, calls him by a new name, and summons him to be a new man. He looks Matthew in the eye, the tax collector counting his worldly security, and calls him to a life that is spiritually solid, but radically uncertain in material things. Looking around him he sees the crowd that is listening to him and says 'here are my mother and my brothers'; he summons them to become what he names them to be. The face of God is a face of gentle challenge.

Often, of course, the face of God looks out on the broken and the damaged, and soaks them with his healing. 'Look upon my son, for he is my only child' an unnamed man says to Christ, and the face of God looks healing upon the boy, and he is made whole (Lk 9.38). When power is drained from him, jostled by a crowd, the Lord looks to see who touched him: the healing is to be no mere magic trick, it must be combined with a gaze from the face of God (Mk 5.32).

'He who has seen me has seen the Father'. If there was any doubt about this, read the story of the Transfiguration, when the face of Jesus on the mountain top shines like the Sun – shines with the brightness of the Father (Mt 17.21) When the people are hungry he takes bread and fishes and looks up to the Father, face to face, to call down blessings upon the food. The Father and Jesus are one, as the Gospel today tells us.

Seek his face. We do not have far to look to see the face of God, every line is carefully laid out for us in the scriptures. It is a face of compassion, of challenge, of healing, of summons and calling. It is a face still marked with the piercings of the Crown of thorns, still smudged with tears and with the spittle the angry guards gave it as their final gift before the crucifixion. It is a face that has seen all the worlds troubles and all the world's joys. It is a face at once infinitely complex and infinitely simple. It is a face of extraordinary beauty.