

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)
5th February 2023

We cannot go on as we are. I suppose that this sentence has been on the lips of reformers for centuries, perhaps for as long as human beings have organised themselves together into social groups. The ways of doing things that served us well in the past, or appeared to do so (perhaps, in reality, they only served some of us well) no longer seem good enough. Now, however, it seems it is not just reformers who have a powerful sense that our present way of doing things has hit the buffers, there is a general sense that things need to change.

Regardless of particular political issues in particular places, much more generally, it seems there is a sense that our present way of ordering the world is not working. The internet means that we are able to communicate much more quickly and efficiently – instantly, in fact – and so ideas can spread fast: good ideas, but bad ideas, too. We can use this instant communication to learn and to teach, but also to obscure and to confuse. We know that we have become obsessed with, and dependent on, mobile technology, but we can't seem to help ourselves.

Scientific advances mean that we are able to do things unheard of just a few years ago, but these new insights can as easily be used to destroy as to build. The drone that flies over the church and checks the building for damage and faults could just as easily drop a bomb on it. We have developed endless new ways of improving life (at least for some of us), but at the same time we have taken into our hands frightening new ways of damaging ourselves, damaging one another, damaging the only world that we can call home. There are glorious points of light that illuminate some of the dark points of human misery: sickness, disease, disability are all pushed back by scientific developments. But at the same time, parts of our planet are becoming uninhabitable as temperatures rise; others are short of water, or have become too inhospitable to grow food, and while all is well for the lucky ones born in the right places, for those whose homes are on the edge of destruction, the modern world looks pretty bleak.

In spite of the bright spots, there is, then, a sense that we cannot indefinitely continue as we are. The world cries out for justice, even as it becomes clearer and clearer that it is in short supply. In spite of the bright spots, there is a certain sense of a dark cloud hanging over us, waiting to see if we will have the good sense that is needed to find a better way forward. Before we feel too secure, perhaps we should try living in someone else's shoes. Would you buy a house in Bangladesh, most of the country being below sea level? Or in the Maldives, where there is no point in the country more than 2.3 metres above the sea? No, the world does seem to be wrapped in a dark cloud.

Pope Benedict was very aware of this when he wrote one of his most memorable sentences, back in 2005:

"Love is the light—and in the end, the only light—that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working. Love is possible, and we are able to practise it because we are created in the image of God. To experience love and in this way to

cause the light of God to enter into the world—this is the invitation I would like to extend with the present Encyclical.” (Pope Benedict XVI ‘Deus Caritas Est’ n. 39)

We are told in the Gospel today that we are to be the light of the world, lifted up high so that all around can see it – and, more than just see it, be illuminated by it and shown the way. If the Church is to be a city on the hill, a place of safety for those struggling in the plain below, a place of light, understanding and safety, then it must first pass through the test of charity, the test of love. Experts in science, experts in climate, experts in economics, experts in medicine, experts in agriculture, experts in technology; these all have their parts to play in lifting the gloom that hangs over the modern world. But left to our own devices I am afraid that we will simply use their work as a path to further self-indulgence; the strong will use all they have learned to become more comfortable, while the poor can only look on sadness and disbelief. All these experts, important as they are, will never be enough without another sort of expert. All of them need to be channelled through the work of the experts in love. Without experts in love the world is doomed, and it is only a matter of ‘when’ we finally tip it over the edge into destruction. Love was written into the creation at its outset, so any way of living that ignores love is not only bound to fail, it is, in the end, bound to so weaken the creation that it will rebel.

The only light that can illuminate our gloomy world is love. The world needs an increase in experts in love. A way of living that is based on greed, or acquisition, or promoting my own comfort, or maintaining a distance between me and the poor, or building walls around ourselves is bound to fail, on many different levels. It will never make us happy, it can only make us more frightened of one another. Love is the only commodity that we can never be frightened of giving away, because there is always so much more, an infinite amount. Love is the light, the only light, that will illuminate our world. The experts we need more than any other are experts in love, and if these are not to be found in the Church then – well, where will they be found?