

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst

West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)
3rd July 2022

Last week we heard that Jesus had set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem. The people he had called to follow him on that road, he now sends off ahead of him, to visit all the towns and villages that he will pass through. Their visit will be a sort of preparation, it will be saying to those towns 'You think what you see and hear in us is impressive? Just wait until you see what is coming next!'

But I am getting ahead of myself. Jesus tells the seventy-two that they are to heal and to preach wherever they go, but he also tells them what the first thing they must say is, before doing either of these things. When they arrive, what is it that they say? Is it 'Listen to what we are going to tell you'? No. Is it 'Look at what we are going to do for you'? No. Is it 'Obey what we instruct you'? Certainly not. Is it even 'Stop what you are doing, repent and believe'? No - or at least, not to start with. The first words that they are to speak are: 'Peace to this house'.

This greeting that the seventy-two are sent out to use, which is at first sight perhaps not the most obvious starting point, is actually pretty smart. Of all the things that human beings long for, peace is near the top of the list. How many times have we said 'Just give me some peace!' When the phone keeps ringing, or the email inbox keeps pinging, or the children are arguing, or – you can fill in the blanks yourself - just give me some peace. But it goes deeper than that. All through human history, the human heart has been troubled and disturbed. There is an anxiety, a restlessness, a sense that things are not quite as they should be. Even when times are good this is true, but in times such as these, when the internet means we can see all the troubles and failures of the world, not just those around us; when there is a real threat of uncontrolled war, and the threat of poverty stalks the streets; when there seems to be so much anger and so much controversy, but also so much uncertainty, even the most confident of human hearts feels troubled and disturbed. Where will it all lead, what can be done, how will it end? And so, once again, we want to cry out: 'Give me some peace!'

So, when the seventy-two arrive in new towns and villages, they bring with them a priceless greeting: 'Peace be to this house'. Of course, just saying that does not in itself bring peace, but it does make people sit up and listen, pay attention, ask how it might be that this person can really bring them peace. Just imagine how it would be if they could!

Perhaps a good place to start would be to ask, what are the things that disturb our peace? Broadly speaking, our inner peace is disturbed by inner conflicts. We know that we should be doing one thing, but we cannot stop ourselves doing the opposite, and so we are in conflict and we have no peace. Or there are dozens of ideas, or priorities, or demands all vying for our attention, all shouting louder and louder to get us to make them the number one priority in our lives, and we cannot decide between them all so we flit from one to the next and there is not a chance of peace. Or we are fearful for the future, worried about what tomorrow may bring, and playing again and again through all the possible scenarios, we work ourselves up to a pitch of anxiety and insecurity which is never resolved because as soon as one scenario of anxiety is

resolved another comes along to replace it. And the harder we search for peace, the more it seems to elude us.

But what if peace is, in fact, a bit like happiness – that is to say, you cannot search for it directly, it only comes as a by-product of something else? What if inner peace comes not to those who pursue it, but those who stumble upon it in seeking something else? Perhaps that most famous of all quotes from St Augustine is speaking to us here: *“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”* (Confessions).

Perhaps, then, our search for peace is, itself, a distraction. It has us flitting around looking here, there, everywhere, for some magic bullet, when in fact the answer stares us in the face all along. We are created to seek shelter in, to rest in, to rejoice in, to bask in, the tender and loving presence of God. That is where we are created to hide ourselves, and so long as we are looking for peace in other places we will never achieve it. So the seventy-two travel to the towns that Jesus is to visit as heralds of peace: peace is coming, rest is coming, the sense that all is well and all will be well is coming, because you are about to meet the one who you were created to be sheltered by. And when the Bishop celebrates Mass, he starts by greeting us with ‘Peace be with you’ – an apostle is here, here to lead you into the presence of the only one who can bring peace.

The world we live in is very busy, and complicated, and troubled. There is so much anger, and so much manufactured conflict, so much concentration on the things that divide us rather than those that unite us. News outlets buy our attention by telling us all the things we should be frightened of, and social media makes its presence known by telling us all the ways in which we do not measure up. I really believe that God is calling the Church to be a place of safety and reality in all this, to help people navigate their way through all these demands and find the peace that is so elusive, but so life-giving. Priests are, of course, not immune to all this, and so I say to myself as much as I say it to you, that if we search for inner peace it will always elude us; if we allow ourselves to rest in God’s presence, because that is the place we were always created to be, peace will steal upon us unbidden.

Welcome us, dear Lord, into your joyful and loving presence; because our hearts are restless, and peace eludes us, until we rest in you. Help us to navigate the many conflicting demands that crowd in upon us, and help us to order them so that your priorities, not our own confused and imperfect desires, will show us where our priorities lie. Help us to see that those who have you already possess all that truly matters, and set us free from anxiety with the knowledge that close within the shelter of your arms, all will be well.