

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The First Sunday of Lent (Year B) 18th February 2023

'The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan.'

On this First Sunday of Lent we travel out into the wilderness with Jesus, and in that barren place he is tempted. He is far from the normal comforts of daily life, far from the reassuring words of his family and his friends, far from the company of people who love him, all the things that help to keep life in proportion. Alone and hungry in that alien environment, it is hard to keep a lid on all sorts of thoughts: Have I misunderstood? Have I got it all wrong? Wouldn't it be best just to melt quietly back into the background? And while Jesus is at his weakest, hungry and alone, the Devil comes to tempt him. And this is not some mere token temptation - these are real temptations, which Jesus has to struggle with, and which he could have succumbed to. He could have said 'no' to his Father, as we so often do; but he doesn't, and the reason that he doesn't is that he has spent all his adult life training for this moment. He has deliberately and consciously been growing closer to his Father, fighting already the spiritual battle which will reach a climax here - and another on the night of his arrest.

I mentioned last week that any hope of growth in the spiritual life does not just come from trying harder, it comes from putting ourselves repeatedly in the places where we will encounter the Lord, and taking on those spiritual disciplines that will make it easier for us to say 'Yes' to God. This season of Lent is about listening to the anguished wail of the prophet 'You have forgotten who you are, how great you were created to be!' and responding by going into training. We want to find our way back.

That is why we fast: we fasted on Ash Wednesday, and will again on Good Friday. For many of us the traditional 'giving up' of some good thing in Lent is another form of fasting. It is a free and willing choice to do without something good. Renouncing something that in itself is good is a sort of training, perhaps even a sort of play. I don't need a beer on a Saturday evening, but I quite like one. It's a fairly safe renunciation, it won't do me any harm to do without it - and, to be honest, the world won't collapse if I have a really bad day and give in. I will feel disappointed in myself, I will realise that I was not as strong as I thought I was, that I am more dependent on material things than I thought I was, and so I will learn something, but no lasting harm is done. However, however, these 'safe' renunciations really do matter, because the training that I get in self-control, in learning about all the mind games I play on myself, the ways I try and trick myself into thinking 'it doesn't matter this time' or 'I can start from tomorrow' or whatever will be useful to me when some much more serious temptation comes my way. The training in 'safe' little renunciations will really help me when something very serious is at risk, some temptation that could do real damage to me or to someone else. If we learn how to say 'no' to the easy things, if we begin to understand the tricks we try to play on ourselves to get away with it, then there is a chance we will be equipped to resist the big temptations. But if we never say no to ourselves about anything, will we have any hope when faced with some very major moral dilemma? If my

body shouts at me that it wants something it isn't getting, I have a choice to make. Will I just give in, and lose control of myself? Or will I resist, but be grudging and bad-tempered about it? Or will I learn the delicate and difficult art of staying joyful even when I do not get what I want? And if I learn the latter, isn't that just one of the most important skills to learn in a world of self-indulgence and entitled-ness, and in fact isn't it perhaps the only hope we have of living together as any sort of community in a self-centred world?

Along with fasting, one of the traditional practices of Lent is prayer. We are so familiar with this, that I imagine it just washes straight over you when I say it. But let me ask you this, do you find prayer easy? I won't ask you to respond in public, but I am pretty sure many of you are saying 'no'. I don't either. Bishop Richard reminds us that:

'Prayer is the life-breath of the Christian. Nothing is possible without it and the continuing life of the Diocese...will depend upon the life of prayer of us all' (PPv3 3.1.i)

We sometimes say 'I don't know where to start' - which is fair enough, as long as we don't use it as an excuse for not starting at all. It can be very simple, we don't need to overcomplicate it. You could just sit with the psalms and slowly read through one a day, listening to the words of God as you pray the prayers that Jesus prayed. There are 150 so that will keep you going well into the summer (and one of the psalms is very, very long). There will be little phrases or words that catch your eye and express things that you really want to make your own; and as you read them you will begin to make your own the words of God, and so you will come a little closer to him. Or (that is to say, perhaps as well as this) you could say that you will pray for some other people. How about I say to you that I will pray for you every day, and in return you say that you will pray for me and for each other every day. It doesn't need to be very complex, just 'God bless Our Bishop, our priest and everyone in our parish' and then maybe bring to your mind the image of some of the people who sit around you at Mass. It's nothing very sophisticated, but already it has wrapped our parish in prayer, and that is something big.

The popular writer Fr Ronald Rolheiser said 'All the great spiritual masters offer only one non-negotiable rule: You have to show up for prayer, and you have to show up regularly' (Prayer, Our Deepest Longing).

Lent is under way, we are on the road, together. God has plans for us. Shall we go into training together to become the sort of people he can use to build up his kingdom?