

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Second Sunday of Lent (Year B) 25<sup>th</sup> February 2023

'You have forgotten who you are, who you were meant to be - look again!'

I have been speaking about Lent as our response to this prophetic voice, calling out to us. What can we do in response, what can we do to go into training in this season to help us become more like the sort of people who might have a hope, with God's grace, of becoming saints? What can we do to put ourselves in the places where Christ will pass by, places that will nourish us inwardly, as the collect today says, places where we can call out with St Peter 'It is wonderful for us to be here'?

Last week I spoke a little about fasting and prayer, both of which are essential parts of the Catholic life, and particularly of Lent. Today I want to look at some more tools in the toolkit of holiness. We have to remember that these are not in any sense optional extras. Each and every one of us is being formed and moulded into a new person each and every day. If we are not putting ourselves in the places where God is to be found, the places where he can mould us into the likeness of himself, then something else, some other influence, some other value system is forming and shaping us. And if we are not aware of that, then it is happening without us knowing it, and that makes us very vulnerable indeed.

Along with prayer and fasting, the third traditional spiritual practice for Lent is almsgiving. This requires us to focus for a while on the needs of others, when everything around us is screaming out that we should be concentrating on our own needs. Lent always summons us to simplicity of life - in fact simple humanity, being a fully alive person, draws us to a greater simplicity, but this is heightened in Lent. Life becomes complex when we allow lots of people and things to make demands on our attention. Lent invites us to reflect on where we really want to give our attention, and one of the most truly human things that we can do is to focus on the people who need us. The simpler your life, the more easily you notice the people that need you. The more complex your life, the more you tend to focus on what you need yourself. Lent invites us to prune ruthlessly our attention, to give it sparingly and carefully to the people and the things that we really choose. The more space we open up in our lives like this, the more space there is for the poor. In a quieter life, their gentle voices can more easily be heard.

We know that God is Trinity - three persons endlessly pouring themselves out for each other in love. The very nature of God is self-gift, generosity, pouring out. As we are made in his image that is our nature, too, and this is why generosity makes us feel good: not in the sense of being smug and self-satisfied, but in feeling more ourselves, more real, just more human. Generosity is healing: it has the power to make us whole again if we have been wounded by self-obsession. It is a medicine for selfishness, and one that is prescribed for us all. In using Lent as an extended time in which to 'get real' generosity, with our alms and with our time, is a powerful tool.

Another great tool for Lent, for our attempts to get in touch once again with the real me, is confession. No-one finds this easy, because it demands the sort of radical truth-telling which is so alien in our culture. It requires me to say 'I am wounded, and weak, and I have made choices that were bad, but they were my fault and I am sorry and in need of healing and forgiveness'. This goes against the grain in the modern world, which is why it sometimes feels so strange to us. We are reluctant to open up the darker side of ourselves: but not looking it in the face does not mean it isn't there - in fact refusing to acknowledge it simply makes it stronger. Confession is of course, in a sense, between me and God; but the presence of the priest really matters. It really matters because he has the power to speak the words that guarantee our forgiveness. But it is much more important than that. The presence of the priest makes this, in a sense an act of the Church, an act of the community. We admit our weakness and our woundedness in his presence, representing the community of the faithful, and in doing so we are saying 'I am weak, and wounded, and have failed, but I am part of a community of people (including the priest himself, of course) who are weak and wounded and failing, and in love for one another we have a chance of healing and wholeness - we journey towards wholeness together'. Confession is about acknowledging guilt, which is a healthy thing to do - it is not about shame, which is far from healthy. Guilt says 'I have done bad things, but God can help me sort it out' and this is good; shame says 'I am a bad person and there is nothing to be done' - and this is poisonous and very far from the reality of God's mercy.

Almsgiving and confession join prayer and fasting as essential items in the toolkit of holiness. They are not always comfortable tools to pick up, but once we take them up and use them they become moulded to the shape of our hands, familiar friends, and we might even begin to love them. They will truly help us come to life and find fulfilment in a world that has lost sight of reality, and helping us to do this is the great task of Christ's Church.