

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Second Sunday of Lent (Year C) 13<sup>th</sup> March 2022

A few weeks ago we had some discussions in preparation for the Synod of Bishops in Rome in a couple of years time. One of the issues that came up here was the sense that some people, perhaps especially from younger generations, do not see what the point of coming to Mass is. They do not see how it makes their lives better. I realise, of course, that I am talking to people who do see the point as you are here now, but at least I can give you a few answers to share when people ask: why bother?

I suppose my starting point is this question: in what way is my Monday better, because I was here on Sunday? Or, perhaps more important still, in what way is my wife's Monday, or my work colleagues, friends, family, neighbour's Monday better because I was here on Sunday? There are three questions to look at here over the next few weeks: What difference does it make to me? What difference does it make to everyone else? How do I attend Mass and take part in a fruitful way – how do you go to Mass?

By chance, the Gospel reading today is a great way into this question. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain, and they witness something deeply dramatic. They see the familiar figure of their friend, their Master, in a totally different way. Removed just for a moment from the mundane world of everyday life with all its challenges and burdens they are brought up short and they catch a glimpse of the reality, a glimpse of him in the wonder and the glory and the beauty and the brightness that is really his. And for them it is just 'Wow!' and for a few moments everything else is forgotten and they just stare and it is wonderful. The burdens and the anxieties of everyday life will still be there when they go down the mountain, but the glimpse of glory they have had, this chance to stop and stare because it is wonderful, has set them up for what is waiting for them down below. The beautiful moment on the mountain is just what the three fortunate apostles need to get through all the mess on the plain.

So my Monday is better not just because I sat in a bench with others, or heard a homily or some scripture readings, or sang some songs, important as all those are. My Monday is better because on Sunday I stopped and looked at something beautiful and everything else just fell away.

When we come to Mass we hear a story, in fact much more than that we act in a story, become part of a story, where:  
forgiveness is not only possible, but is freely handed out;  
everyone matters equally, whoever they are;  
love is stronger than hate, and life is stronger than death;  
what we share with those around us is more important than our differences;  
where the fundamental feature of human living is modelled for us by Jesus, and that feature is not gaining power, or being important, or being better than other people, it is simply a generous gift of self;  
where everyone is on the same side, no-one is in competition, and there are no winners, no losers;  
where every life can be turned around and however tarnished it is, it can shine once again.

That is the story we act in at Mass, and just knowing that someone else somewhere is doing it just won't do; we need to be joining this story, and if we are part of a story like that on Sunday, just think what Monday will be like.

St Ignatius of Antioch described the Sacred Host at Mass as 'a medicine of immortality, an antidote to death'. This story that we act in on Sunday is a powerful antidote to all the fake stories we will hear throughout the week, it inoculates us against all those other stories which may look beguiling on the surface, but underneath are poisonous and inhuman. Some of those fake stories are very common, told again and again, almost forced on us. Only by living in the real story can we hope to overcome them.

Anyone who has ever tried to learn a new skill, or a musical instrument, or a language, will know that progress can be painfully slow. It can seem as if hours of practice are achieving nothing, but quietly and slowly we are progressing. It is the same with the spiritual life. It is a lifetime's work of tiny little changes, little growths, and the progress can seem almost invisible. It might seem as if Mondays will not be so very different if we have some Sundays off, but this is not so – any more than a few missed violin practices can be allowed to slip through the net. Growth and change so painfully amassed can fade quite fast. If you take the conductor away from an orchestra they still sound good for a while, then they sound ok, then it all really begins to slip. So it is with us. If we are not at Mass the conductor is gone, and slowly our lives fall out of tune. Our priorities shift, and that story I have just described becomes just a memory, no longer a guiding narrative. Suddenly Monday is not looking so good.

When I try to live well, to live according to the light of the great story, all alone, it can be very hard. But when I sit beside you at Mass and know that you are going out to wrestle with this, too, and so are the people in front of me and those behind, this gives me a real sense of belonging to something bigger, something greater than me, to a movement spread across the world, a community of people who are all, in their different ways, trying to live in the truth, and you have given me a great gift then, because by doing this together there is a real hope for Monday – and for every other day.

Human beings are created to worship: that is, we are created to put ourselves in front of something, look at it and go 'Wow!'. This is what the Jewish Sabbath is all about – on the seventh day God looked on his creation with a long lingering gaze and saw that it was so good. At Sunday Mass we put ourselves in front of Jesus Christ, in all his mercy and love and gentleness and openness and understanding and joy and generosity and we go 'Wow!' That is Sunday Mass. Human beings are built to worship. If we are not gazing at Christ in all the glory that the disciples saw on the mountain-top and being bowled over, what are we saying Wow to? Comfort, security, wealth, food, prosperity?

So, what difference does it make to my Monday that I was here on Sunday? The differences week by week may be small, but over time they make something great. Every meeting with the beauty of Christ at Mass drives me to seek change, change in how I live, change in how I engage with the world around me. With no Mass, what is going to push me to change? What change will it inspire? Monday – and every day, will be better because we were here.