

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

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

Last week I spoke about what difference going to Mass makes, the ways in which my Monday (and every other day) is better because I was here on Sunday. I don't want to go back over it again, but basically here at Mass I meet reality, human life as it was designed to be lived, I discover again each week what it means to be truly and fully alive, and I experience a world where hope, trust, faith, love, generosity triumph; and this helps me to overcome all the fake ideas and stories that would otherwise throw me off course in the weekday world.

Today I want to ask a slightly different question: In what way is my wife's Monday (and my friends, colleagues, neighbours etc) better because I was here on Sunday? Once again the scripture readings are a real help. Moses sees a bush ablaze, but not consumed by the fire. And he takes off his shoes and stares because this is holy, this is beautiful, this is just so different. And this spectacle, this experience, this 'Wow, what is that?' sets him up for something big. Now you have to go and lead the people out of slavery, lead them into freedom, and it's a big ask, a tough job, but it will be ok – just remember this meeting with the beauty of holiness and you will manage it just fine. And so he does. Moses' meeting with God in the burning bush makes the future for his people: no encounter, no Exodus. This is not 'Oh look, a burning bush, that's pretty.' This is 'That is amazing, beautiful, challenging, inspiring and I need to do things differently, now anything is possible'.

On its most basic level, the person next to you now's Monday will be better because you were at Mass today, because this celebration is a community act. We depend on one another, and by being here together we create a powerful and life-giving community. We are not a group of separate individuals who happen to be in one place (like all the shoppers in a store at any one moment) we are all here together to do one thing, and we feel good doing this in a crowd with other people. You cannot really have a celebration on your own, and although that is exactly what I did during the lockdowns, and although it was a completely valid Mass, it did not feel the same. I needed you here, and you needed each other. By being here together we strengthen and support each other. At the start of Mass we confess our sins to God – but also to each other. If we are not here we do not acknowledge our own brokenness, and nor do we hear others do the same. We are more vulnerable to the illusion of perfection. I need you to hear my 'I confess...'

I have always known that Sunday Mass has a double effect: the glorification of God and the sanctification of man. But I always interpreted that as meaning I become more holy (at least until I mess it all up again) by being here. But now I see there is more to it than that. I come here and, by giving glory to God, I become more holy, not for my benefit, but so that I can go out and help other people become more holy. Holiness is catching, and we are reinfected week by week at Sunday Mass. I come to Mass so that I can become, for the time being, more the person God made me to be and so when I go out of the church I can then help you to become more the person you were meant to be. So all the people I will meet this week need me to have been here, they really do.

What difference does our church make to our local community? Well, the building is a sign of God's presence; it is a place of encounter, a place where people can come and visit to engage with the Holy One. But the community that gathers here is more than that, and although it might be harder to see the Church would be alive and active and present even without the building. There are projects that we support locally, charitable activities that we take part in, often with other Christians. But the real difference lies in lives transformed week by week. We all come here for Mass, and we get caught up in the story of God and his outrageous love, and generosity and mercy and that story sticks to us like burrs from a thistle plant, and then out we go dropping those burrs wherever we go throughout the week, taking with us into every place we go the love and generosity we have picked up here. The seeds that were sown in us in this Mass will be sown all around our parish in the next few days. Our local people need us to have been here, need us to have stocked up here on the scandalous mercy of God.

There is a strand of thought among some Catholics – I am sure not anyone here- that says 'I hope Mass won't last too long'. Well, in a sense, Mass lasts all week. The basic shape of Mass is we offer gifts to God, he receives them, transforms them, and gives them back. Its like the loaves and the fish at the feeding of the five thousand: they are handed over to Jesus who prays over them, multiplies them, and hands them back – and the handing back goes on, and on, and on. At Sunday Mass God takes our gifts, our offerings of ourselves, transforms such a flimsy gift, and hands it back for the life of the world, giving his presence, kindness and goodness to the world through us all through the week. The giving back of what he has received from us does not end until the following Sunday.

And there is one more thing (well, there are many more, but one more to mention). Here at Sunday Mass we do something that seems totally bizarre in the modern world. All together, admittedly only briefly, we fall silent, we sit or kneel in complete silence. Where else does a group of people fall totally silent together? Shared silence is so powerful. It is the silence of the long-married couple, the silence of contentment, the silence of 'there is nothing I need to say, so I will say nothing', the silence of a joyfully shared presence. It is a silence that calms us, that makes us more attentive, makes us listen. To have been silent together is another thing our family and friends need us to have experienced.

So, I need Sunday Mass. I need it for my sake, but I also need it because you need me to be here (regardless of me being a priest, we all need each other here) so that we here each other's humble confession. We need the affirmation of being not lone disciples but pilgrims together. We need to be silent together, easy and content just to be together. And the world outside needs us to be changed, needs us to live all week what we have begun here and now.