

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fourth Sunday of Lent (Year A) 19th March 2023

The highlight of my recent, very brief, trip to Rome was, without doubt, praying at the tomb of Pope Benedict XVI. Like no-one else he had the ability to express deep truth in very simple ways, and it was a great inspiration to feel close to him once again. He has something very helpful to say that makes this Gospel story come to life, but before I share that with you I want to give a little context.

Lent is the time when, for hundreds of years, people have prepared for Baptism at Easter. The scripture readings of the Sundays of Lent are carefully chosen to express the longing for Baptism that people experience. Last week we read about the thirst of the Samaritan woman at the well; this week we read about a man born blind; next week we will read about Lazarus who is raised from the dead: thirsty, blind, dead. These stories graphically express what the catechumens long for. They are thirsty – thirsty for knowledge, thirsty for meaning, thirsty to understand what life is all about, what life is for, what will make it fruitful and lively. They are blind, though – blind to the things of God, blind to the unseen realities of the world, blind to the ancient wisdom that is the key to fulfilment in life. Thirsty and blind, their lives are lacking in the liveliness and the capacity to make the world seem more alive; they long to be bringers of life into places of sleep and stagnation, but they do not yet have the gifts. These three Sunday Gospels set out, in three different ways, the human longing for something richer, deeper, more lively, and more life-giving.

Am I saying that you cannot be a good person outside the Church? Certainly not. Am I saying that you cannot be happy outside the Church? Definitely not. There are plenty of people outside the Church who are able to live happy, worthwhile and fulfilling lives. But if we want the very best, it is to be found by staying close to Jesus Christ, to planting our feet in his footprints. There is a thirst within us all, recognised or not, that only he can slake, a sight of the deeper things that only he can give, and a fully-aliveness that flows only through him.

And this is what Pope Benedict says to us, in his encyclical 'Deus Caritas Est':

"Love is the light—and in the end, the only light—that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working. Love is possible, and we are able to practise it because we are created in the image of God. To experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world—this is the invitation I would like to extend with the present Encyclical."

St Paul says in the second reading 'You were darkness once, but now you are light in the Lord'; Jesus says in the Gospel 'I am the light of the world'. Pope Benedict tells us that love is the only light that can bring light into the dark places of the world. This story about a man born blind is, in reality, a story about love; so is the story of the woman at the well, and so is the raising of Lazarus. Jesus sees the woman at the well, a woman who has failed at love and hides herself from judgemental eyes; he sees her, and in seeing her he loves her, and she feels first a raging

thirst for love, then the coolness of that thirst's disappearance; and she is transformed, for the first time seeing the world in colour, seeing the world in three dimensions, and she hurries away to share her joy. The blind man happens to be by the road as Jesus passes, and seeing him in his diminished life, the life of a beggar, Jesus loves him and in that loving he heals him. It is the love that heals, it is as simple as that; just as, next week, it will be the love that raises Lazarus. And read carefully what Pope Benedict says: he invites people '*To experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world.*' This is so significant. We let the light of God enter the world when we let God love us – it is not so much the giving of love (which comes later) that allows God into the world, it is letting him love us.

First the woman at the well; then the blind beggar; then the dead Lazarus; all of them allow themselves to be loved by Christ and amazing things happen. The Jewish religious leaders will not accept God's love, will not accept it, and so they remain blind to reality, frightening people, arguing with them and abusing them.

To some extent we are all of us people who allow God to love us, otherwise we wouldn't be here in the Church. But there is a standing invitation to us, that we might lower our guard and let him love us more. It requires a little courage, because it means admitting what we lack: we are all, to some extent, thirsty, blind, lifeless. If we will only admit that and allow him to love us, we are opening the door to great things.