

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fourth Sunday of Lent (Year B) 10th March 2024

In today's Gospel reading Jesus gives us a frightening glimpse of what lies in the future: 'The Son of Man must be lifted up...'. Surely Nicodemus can have had no idea at the time what this might mean - but imagine how this would have come back into his mind with a jolt at the time of the crucifixion. Already the ground is being laid to help people understand this cruel and heartless event.

The leaders of the people want Jesus crucified to make an example of him, to humiliate him, to show him as utterly powerless and totally rejected. The Romans do not really understand what is going on, but to keep the peace they are happy to comply: one dead holy man more or less means little to them. But the plan will backfire spectacularly. Far from being humiliated and emptied of any power, Jesus lifted high on the cross for all to see becomes a symbol of the ongoing war between love and hate, between generosity and self-serving, between gift and theft. There on the cross, in full view of all the world, good and evil, light and dark, will be locked in combat. No-one will be able to say the battle never happened, it has been there for all to see.

Knowing what lies in the future, knowing that there will be a mighty battle that will be so public that its final outcome on Easter Day cannot be hidden, Jesus sows the seed. He gives Nicodemus what he will need to make sense of what is to come. Jesus must be lifted up for all to see: the Devil will take the bait and start a battle that he cannot win. Light and dark will have to fight it out.

'Though the light has come into the world men have shown they prefer darkness to the light'. The Son of Man, the Lord of love, physician of souls and prince of mercy, has come to bring a light that reveals, a light that reveals the truth to people - above all the light, shining into their souls, reveals to them the truth about themselves. People have turned against the light, because they do not want to see so clearly - and so they try to snuff out the light. But in lifting him up high for all to see they have, in fact, placed the light upon a tall lampstand. There he is, presiding over all our gatherings, looking down on us with eyes of pity and shining brightly with the light of love. The Lord Jesus crucified is the eternal light of love; he is a constant reminder to the world - that is, to all of us - that true power is exercised in mercy, in service, in gift of oneself - anything else is not power at all, it is just the self-promotion of the insecure.

Christ crucified is the constant and enduring light that shines over the world. He is the source of light that shows, at the same time, what happens when people prefer darkness to light, and also what humanity might yet be. He is the light of the world, he is the light-bearer above all light-bearers.

But this passage is not just a prediction of what lies in the future for the Lord. It is a call, a summons, a vocation. Jesus summons Nicodemus, and after him all of us, too, to be bearers of

light. On the day of our baptism we were each given a lighted candle. This was no mere pretty symbol. As we were given the candle, the priest said:

*You have been enlightened by Christ.
Walk always as a child of the light
and keep the flame of faith alive in your heart.
When the Lord comes, may you go out to meet him
with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom. Amen.*

We are baptised to be children of the light, to be bearers of the light, the light that shows people who they really are, who they might become, that shows them where true greatness lies.

As I read through the Pastoral Plan for our Diocese, it seems very clear that what we are truly being called to do is to become, more and more, bearers of the light of Christ. The world needs this so badly. It is full of violence, and hate, and misunderstanding; it is so polarised, so 'shouty', so reluctant to listen to other voices; scratch the surface of this anger and defensiveness, and it looks so frightened, so fragile, so insecure, so unsure of itself and so very, very lost. Like someone lost on the moors on a dark night the world needs a light - a light that reveals the truth (there is no cliff, no pit, no river to fall into) and to show the way. It needs light, it needs the Lord of love, physician of souls and prince of mercy. When the Bishop tells us that we 'must keep our minds and hearts fixed on Christ' (PP v.3 1.7) this, I think, is what he means. The struggle between light and dark will become very obvious in our liturgy over the next few weeks. But it is just as obvious in the world around us. As we work together over the coming months to build a new structure for Mission for our local Church, we must not allow ourselves to become inward-looking, to focus solely on serving our own needs. The light is Christ - there is no other light that guides and saves the lost - and the light is for lifting up high, high on a lampstand, not hidden under a bucket (Matthew 5.15).

What might we do to become more familiar with the light of Christ?
How might we allow him, in our prayer, to flood our lives with light?
Are we prepared for what this light might reveal about us?
Are we ready to say with the psalmist 'The Lord is my light and my help, whom then shall I fear?'
Are we ready to become bearers of the light of Christ, carrying him proudly into a world of the lost?