

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Fifth Sunday of Lent (Year B) 17<sup>th</sup> March 2024

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus leads us into the heart of the mystery of human existence, with a truth that will keep coming back to us in the coming couple of weeks:

*'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.'*

His disciples may not fully understand what he means now, but come Good Friday and Easter Day they certainly will. *'Now is my soul troubled'* he goes on to say, but then *'Father, glorify your name'*. Jesus reveals to his friends a deep truth about human life, but it is not a comfortable one. It runs against our desire to please ourselves, promote ourselves, and put ourselves first, and so it is very troubling and disturbing. Jesus is tempted just as we are, and the temptation to act as if the law of self-gift were not written into the human life is strong: strong and soul-troubling.

But the temptation passes; he is victorious. The grain of wheat will be buried deep in the earth so that it can bear fruit. It is a part of the purpose of Lent that we should rediscover this truth about life, that it reaches its fulfilment in the gift of ourselves. In our Opening Prayer we asked that we might be *'eager in that same charity'* which marked Christ's gift of himself, *'out of love for the world'*. If we can develop the habit of charity - that is to say, the habit of a generous gift of ourselves, it does indeed become a habit, almost second nature. And, more than that, as it becomes a habit, built into our lives, into our way of making decisions, our daily choices, we can see its effects: the habit of charity, its repetition, reveals to us the fruit of that charity in the lives of the people around us. We are able to see the difference that it makes.

Are we eager in charity? Probably sometimes yes, sometimes not so much. The season of Lent is a kind of workout, inviting us to go into training in self-gift. If we take on that training - and it isn't too late even now to do it - Easter bursts into life for us. Instead of something outside us, it becomes a part of us, this extraordinary bursting into life of the single grain buried underground. Easter is not just one more day in a long succession of them, a day like any other. Easter is unique, it is one of a kind, it is the day that the law of the fruitfulness of self-gift becomes visible - in fact it becomes so obvious that no-one can deny it.

*'Deep within them I will plant my Law'* says God through Jeremiah. Yes, that is just what he does, and the Law written in human hearts is just this - the fruitfulness and the fulfilment of self-gift; the fruitfulness of the grain that is not preserved and clung onto, but released, let go, and planted in the ground.

On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, we are invited by the church to gather ourselves up, ready for the rigours of Holy Week. Next Sunday we will travel to Jerusalem, and there we will be again on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. It will be exhausting but life-giving for us. If we are going to make the most of it we will need to be in the right mental and spiritual place, in the right frame of

mind, and that is what this Sunday is about. It says to us 'Look out through the story of Holy Week; look out for the principle of the grain released, and the grain that is clung to. Who are the actors in that terrible drama who cling on to what they have, cling on to who they are, cling on to the way they have always done things, cling on to what they think makes them secure? And who are the actors who let go the past, let go what they have been used to, let go what they had hoped for, in the eagerness of charity. Pilate is a clinger on, scared of a riot and scared for his position; Herod is a clinger, too, worried about losing the favour of his Roman puppet-masters; Judas clings on as well, so besotted with his own idea of what Jesus should be that he would rather destroy his Lord than release his own ideas of what he should be like. Jesus, above all, is the one who lets go, the seed planted in the soil. Peter will start off as one who clings to what he has (I swear, I do not know the man) but he will change, he will learn from his master until one by one he and each of the twelve will follow their Lord in eagerness of self-gift.

It is a challenging way to read the story, to watch it from the sidelines as we see it acted out in front of us a week from now. Might we be being called to a more eager charity, a more eager gift of ourselves? Might there be aspects of our lives where we are too prone to cling on to the past, to what is familiar, to what we have always done, and in clinging on and refusing to bury the grain we deprive ourselves of the fruitfulness of new life?