

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Thirty First Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 5th November 2023

When we read a passage from the Gospels, it is always worth checking carefully to see who it is addressed to – who is the audience for this speech? Is it the disciples alone, or is it some smaller group, or is it a large mixed group of people, or is it the religious leaders? If we understand who is being addressed, it will help us understand better the purpose of the address. Here Jesus is talking about the scribes and the Pharisees, but he is not addressing them directly. He is not calling them, here, to conversion and change (although he does do that elsewhere), he is saying to a general group of people, which includes his disciples, 'Don't be like them'. He is, in effect, saying, 'the movement that I am inviting you to join is going to be very different; the Pharisees look for their rewards, their gratification, from the praise and admiration of other people; they say that they love God, but in reality they love themselves – and this self-love is dressed up as a love of God; I don't want the people who choose to follow me to go the same way'.

The flaw in the Pharisees is that they say one thing, and do something else. They expect other people to act in a certain way, but they do not hold themselves to the same standard. This is hardly very unusual; it is a common human failing. But Jesus recognises that, common as it may be, in religious terms it is a massive turn-off. There is nothing more guaranteed to swich people off from Faith than the sense that those preaching it cannot be trusted. Jesus is calling people into a new kind of faith movement, a new kind of Church, where this self-love masquerading as love of God has no place at all. It is an exciting prospect, and it is also one of the reasons that great crowds flock to hear Jesus preach. They sense that there is something new and different here, and it is intensely appealing: they want more.

Sadly, of course, we know that the calling to live as a servant, not as a Lord, which Jesus embodies in everything he does, is not so easy for us to put into practice. The very best of his disciples finds it a hard road to travel. It is relatively simple to make the odd occasional act of great generosity and humility, but to live like that all the time, that really is a challenge. I imagine that every one of us feels hopelessly inadequate for this.

And yet, we have to acknowledge that this is immensely appealing, and we feel that hard as it may be, we must at least try. We must at least try to live as this radical and beautiful community that the Lord has called us into. The texts of our Mass today give us several pointers to help us with this.

First of all, the Collect at the start of Mass, which is a prayer from the Leonine Sacramentary written some time in the seventh century, taking us deep back into the past, back into a timeless sense of what it means to be human, calls us to 'hasten without stumbling'. If we want to understand what it means to live in this new sort of family that is gathered around Christ, we are to be a people who hasten without stumbling. People hurry to something g that matters to them, something they really don't want to miss. Just for the moment this is something that has taken over their attention – I must not miss the last train home – and everything else fades into the

background. And, because they know that time is of the essence, they will take special care not to stumble: a trip, a fall, time getting up and dusting myself off may mean failure, so I know I must not stumble. A part of the fundamental attitude of the follower of Christ is to hasten without stumbling, to let nothing distract us from hurrying towards Christ, but hurrying with care so that we avoid all those things that might trip us up.

Then there are the words of the psalmist, who has set his soul in 'silence and peace'. The absurd self-promotion of the Pharisees is fed by noise and activity: just a moment of silence, of tranquility, would lead them into reflection and make them see just how absurd all this parading of themselves is. Even when hastening towards God, there is always room for setting ourselves into silence and peace, which allow us to reflect on how we appear to the world around us.

Then there is St Paul, who came to love the Thessalonians so much that he gave them not only the Good News, but even his whole life. He devoted himself to them totally, not for his own benefit but so that they may receive the Good News not as merely something interesting or diverting, not as an academic exercise or one more way of living amongst many others, but as a lively power, something fizzing and buzzing with life and freshness. Self-gift in witnessing to the lively power of God, this is St Paul's remedy against hypocrisy.

And finally there is the hard-hitting Gospel story itself, in which the Lord makes it very clear to his followers that the fundamental relationship among his followers is not master and servant, or leader and follower, but brothers and sisters in Christ. St Augustine expressed this reality very clearly when he wrote:

"For you I am a bishop, with you, after all, I am a Christian. The first is the name of an office undertaken, the second a name of grace; that one means danger, this one salvation." (Sermon 340)

To be a Christian, a brother of his people, was his salvation – to be a leader, with all the temptations that brings, the temptations of the Pharisees, was a danger.

These texts are, then, a masterclass for us. They are a masterclass in humility, in living unlike the Pharisees, in founding, inhabiting, and calling others into a radically different sort of community. It was difficult to do then, and it is difficult to do now. But to recognise the need is the first step towards making it happen.