

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) 21<sup>st</sup> January 2023

The scripture readings for today are full of instructions, full of things for us to do.

'Sing a new song to the Lord'.

'Get up, go, and preach'.

'Live as though...'

'Follow me'.

Although at first sight they may look as if there is little connection between them, in fact they all hang together. The fundamental one is 'Follow me', everything else flows from that. To the person who refuses this call, the one who turns away from it and ignores it, all the rest will fall on deaf ears. The fundamental call issued to every one of us by God is 'Follow me'. We know this, of course, but we do not always act as if we did. 'Follow me' means 'Let me be your guide, let me set the direction in which we will travel, the speed at which we will go, the places where we will stop, and the people with whom we will engage'. While we might well say 'Yes' to that with our minds, in fact what we are often thinking is 'Well, Lord, *you follow me* - you come with me to all the places where I want to go, while I do all the things I want to do anyway'. 'Follow me' is easy enough to take on board as long as the Lord is going where we want to go anyway. It becomes a bit more challenging when we planned to go one way, but he has another in mind.

We do need to remind ourselves that the song we are singing is a new one, it is a song endlessly being written and rewritten by God himself, a new song for us to learn and inhabit, a new song that shakes up all the monotones and the dull noise of everyday life.

St Paul wants to help the Corinthians to sing a new song, he wants to help them follow the Lord joyfully, rather than just hoping that he will follow them. And so, in today's short passage, he offers four separate pieces of advice on how to live - 'live as though' - and one further 'do not become engrossed'. Everyone has various fundamental ideals that they follow, whether they realise it or not. We all have our 'live as thoughts'. Today's scriptures challenge us to assess them and hold them up against the standards of St Paul.

What are your 'live as thoughts'? What are mine? What are the prevailing ones of the culture around us, because the odds are we will find it difficult to avoid taking those on?

St Paul tells us, if we have a wife, to live as though we had none. This is a tricky one to make sense of. He believed that time was growing short; the world is time-limited, its days are growing short. St Paul is certainly not anti-marriage - he has just been praising it and upholding it - but he is cautious, so that our intimate relationships do not stand between us and God. Do not live as though your relationship with another person is the be all and end all of life. Important and beautiful as it is, it remains subject to the relationship you each, and both together, have with

God. Your married life, and the joy that it hopefully brings, is not the fundamental good of your life, it finds its place as a piece in the bigger jigsaw which is our relationship with God.

Live as though there were nothing to mourn for - again this is far from easy but he is inviting us into a view of the world where nothing that is of value is ever completely lost; it may be parted from us for a while, or hidden from our sight, or hard to find at present, but it is never lost completely.

Live as though there were nothing to laugh about - a dreary sort of life surely? But this is addressed to those who are enjoying life - there is nothing wrong with that, God never wants us to be miserable, but the moment enjoying life becomes the primary aim of all you do, then you are in trouble; living well, the goal of every human existence, is about living the good and lifegiving life, not the one motivated by enjoyment. Joy is a by-product of good living, not an aim in itself.

If your life is all about buying things, live as though you had nothing of your own. The will to possess is a cruel and enslaving tyrant, and the wise person will live as though this meant little to them. And do not become engrossed in the world, because it will pass. The time will come when the world has passed into history, and only eternal life remains. How sad on that day to have nailed our colours to the mast of a world now sunk without a trace.

‘Live as though’: this is a helpful guide about how to live life well. In the culture around us we can see some more unsavoury versions. There are those who live as though God did not exist - he is completely left out of what they do, and how they make decisions. However well-intentioned they may be, this lack of completeness in their view of the world is bound to lead to trouble. There are those who live as though material things are all that matter, what you see is what you get; but there is a whole world of meaning in people and in objects that exists below the surface, and hidden from our senses. If we neglect the unseen meaning of people and of things, it is like walking along a street with our eyes closed: we will know that there are people and things there, but we will only have a vague idea of who and what they are, of what they mean.

There are plenty more toxic ‘live as thoughts’: live as though pleasure was king; live as though possessions are a measure of value; live as though some people are more important than others; live as though some people are not really human at all; live as though we can create our own truth, rather than living in the real world; live as though the created world is our to do with as we please. The list goes on and on, a sorry catalogue of failed delusions. You can create your own ‘live as though’ audit of your life. Unless our live as thoughts help us follow the Lord; unless they help us sing his new song bright and clear above the cacophony of the modern world; unless they help us get up, go, and proclaim the truth, then they are failing us, letting us down, and tying us up to render us powerless, joyless and, in the end, hopeless.

What are your ‘live as thoughts’?