

## The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)  
January 23rd 2022

Some 2,500 years ago, the people of Israel are weeping in exile. They had gambled against the great regional power of the day and lost, and they have been taken off to Babylon. The Temple, the great dwelling place of God among his people, has been destroyed and all its treasures looted. They are far from even its ruins; far from the city where David ruled, the city and land given to their forefathers by God for ever, far from the towns and the villages, the rivers and the seas, that feature so large in the tale of God's love affair with his people. All of it has been taken from them, and they now live among strange people in a strange land. How could this have happened to them? And so they sing a lament for their lost city, their lost nation:

By the waters of Babylon,  
there we sat down and wept,  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there  
we hung up our lyres.  
For there our captors  
required of us songs,  
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,  
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"  
How shall we sing the LORD's song  
in a foreign land?  
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!  
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy! [Psalm 137.1-6]

They cannot bring themselves to make a new life in Babylon, because they are haunted by what they have lost. And then, fifty years or so after they were led into exile, things begin to change. Babylon is thrown into panic at the sight of the Persian king, Cyrus. He has inflicted defeat after defeat on the Babylonians, and in the end he marches into Babylon unopposed. There he finds the Jewish exiles, and issues his famous decree allowing them to return home. Back in Jerusalem the people set about rebuilding their lost temple, but still their sense of who they are, of what their nation is all about, of their founding history, remains vague. Then Nehemiah is sent to be governor in Jerusalem, and Ezra the priest is sent to renew for the people their friendship with God. He summons the people to a public square, climbs onto a great wooden platform, and reads to them the Book of The Law. This, O people, is who you are. This is the God who chose you, this is the task that he called you to, this is the joy of your past and the hope of your future. And once again the people weep,

just as they wept in Babylon. Not, this time because of all that they have lost, but because of what they have found. They thought that they knew who they were, but Ezra has said to them 'Look again'; and, looking again, they find themselves in the middle of the story of God's great dance with his people, and they weep to think of all that they have missed out on. So Ezra says to them 'don't weep because of what you missed, rejoice and feast because of what you have found'.

Moving on a few centuries, St Luke decides to set down his Gospel, and right at the start he explains why he is doing this: to give an ordered account of the story, so that his readers can understand the foundation of all that they have heard. St Luke is doing just what Ezra did all those years before. He is answering the questions: Who are you? Where have you come from? What is the story that you belong to? And as St Luke does that he relates an incident early in the ministry of Christ, where Christ goes to the synagogue and reads a passage from Isaiah – a passage which, strangely, was written at about the time that those exiles came back to Jerusalem. Once again, this is a passage about identity, about where we come from and where we are heading. Who is Jesus? One anointed by the Father, sent to bring good news to the poor, freedom to captives, sight to the blind, and relief to the downtrodden. That is who Jesus is. He is the one sent by the Father to do all these things, and to gather around him a community that will do them with him, not just for a few years but for all eternity, until the end of time.

So, when we read these scripture passages at Mass today, the first of them reminds us how easy it is to forget our story, the narrative that we belong to, the history that makes us who we are. It invites us to discover once again the tale that has brought us to this moment, to reconnect with all that people have done before us, all that has helped us arrive at this place. We are part of the body of Christ, all of us with our roles to play in bringing him to the world. We are part of a body that has, for thousands of years, brought good news to the poor, set captives free, opened eyes and relieved the downtrodden. That is the task to which the Lord called his first followers, and to which he continues to call us in every generation. Let us not be distracted from that by all sorts of other things; let us not forget our story. It is Jesus Christ who reads that passage out for us in this Mass today, looks us in the eye, and says: 'This text is being fulfilled today, even as you listen'.