

Homily for The Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C) (20/06/10)

On First Communion Weekend this homily takes the form of a letter written to the children receiving Holy Communion for the first time.

My Dear Young Friends,

I expect it seems strange that I am writing you a letter like this. I know that your First Holy Communion will be a very exciting occasion, and that you may find it difficult to concentrate on what I say to you, and difficult to remember it later on. Also, some of the things I want to say are quite difficult to understand, so you may want to put this letter away somewhere safe and come back to it when you are a little older – perhaps when you are about to receive the sacrament of confirmation in about 7 years time.

The gospel which I read at your First Communion tells the story about Jesus asking his friends two questions: ‘who do the crowds say I am?’ and ‘who do you say I am?’ (Luke 9.18-24). These are very important questions, but I want to begin at the beginning. The story starts in a very odd way. St Luke says: ‘One day when Jesus was praying alone in the presence of his disciples...’ What on earth does that mean – how can he be praying alone in the presence of his disciples? Surely you are either alone, or you are with other people; you cannot be both, can you? I think it means that Jesus was with his friends, but he was praying silently, talking to God the Father and listening to him, and that he was so caught up in what he was doing that for a while he didn’t notice anyone else was there. You know how you can get so absorbed in reading a book, or in watching television, or in playing a game, that you don’t hear your mum or your dad calling you. That, I think, is how it was. Jesus was totally absorbed in being with God the Father, and although his disciples were very close to him, he forgot for a while that they were there.

When Jesus notices that his friends are with him, he asks them: ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’ Everyone, it seems, has been talking about him, wondering who he might be. People have come up with lots of ideas, but basically they think he is one of the prophets, a good man with a message worth listening to. In a way they are right; he is a prophet, and he is worth listening to. But he is more than a prophet. Sometimes today people say the same thing; they say Jesus is a holy man, a prophet with some good ideas. Again, they are partly right: Jesus is good, and he does have some good ideas. But he is also much, much more than this.

After he has asked his friends what other people are saying about him, Jesus asks them what they think. Do they agree with the crowds? This is a very important question. In a way it is the most important question in the whole of the gospels. Who do they really think Jesus is? It must have been tempting to say something like ‘We agree with the crowds, you are a prophet, a great man.’ No one could really argue with that, that would be quite a safe answer. But they don’t say that.

It is Peter who answers for them all. He says 'The Christ of God'; he believes that Jesus is the Messiah, the Saviour, the very Son of God. This is much more than the crowds have been saying. Why is this so important? It is very, very important, because it shows that Peter's mind, his whole way of thinking, has been completely changed, remade, re-formed. The crowds think that Jesus is a prophet, maybe even an ancient prophet come back to life. They cannot imagine anything more than that. But Jesus is always challenging us to go beyond what we can imagine, to go beyond what we thought was possible. He wants to expand our minds so that we can believe things that go way beyond what we could ever normally imagine. Peter's answer is so important because it shows that he has understood this. He has been able to imagine something that he would never have thought of before, and the moment his mind is expanded, the moment he dares to believe it, he sees that it is obviously true. It is only the people whose minds stay small, who will not let them be expanded, who will not or cannot allow Jesus to suggest something totally new, who cannot believe. This might remind you of another story from the gospels, one which also involves Peter. He sees Jesus walking across the water, and he tries to walk on the water himself towards Jesus. As long as he lets Jesus expand his mind, as long as he dares to believe that Jesus can do extraordinary things, all is well. The moment he lets his mind shrink again, the moment he expects nothing out of the ordinary to happen, he starts to sink.

In fact, this is a very good lesson for us to learn on First Communion Day: as long as our minds are small, and sceptical, kept closed, we will only ever understand half of the story. But the moment we let God push us beyond what we dared to imagine could be true, we begin to see the real glory of things. When we look at a flower and see only a flower, we see something pretty and diverting, but nothing more. Look again, look harder, and see something infinitely complex, with a beauty that is breathtaking. Look at bread and you see food to solve our physical hunger; look at *this* bread, and let God expand what you dare to believe, let him expand your imagination, expand your expectations, and you see something that becomes the body of Christ.

All of this is summed up in the words at the end of the gospel story of this day. Jesus says 'anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will save it'. Once again, these words seem very difficult to make sense of. How can wanting to save my life lose it? How can losing my life for Jesus' sake save it? In fact, there are two different ways of living. I can choose to live life on the surface, I can be one of the crowd, one of the vast mass of people who, like the crowd in our story, think Jesus is a prophet, a good man, but nothing more. Or, I can choose a different sort of life. I can let God expand my horizons, I can let him open my mind. I can allow him to take me beyond what I dare to imagine. That was the decision that Peter had to make. He could have chosen to be like the crowd, to take the safe option, to make sure he didn't stand out, didn't look different. Instead he said, no, I will dare to be different, I will dare to believe. I will surrender my old way of living, a way that just sees things on the surface, a way that is cramped by my small mind, my lack of vision. I will lay down that way of life, I will give it up. In return he receives a new life, a different, infinitely richer, way of living, with his mind expanded way beyond what he

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would have dared to believe. In that way of living so much more becomes possible, so much more is opened up to us.

So, on this your First Holy Communion Day, Jesus offers you a choice. You can choose to live as most people do; this might be a very good sort of a life, a virtuous life, even a happy one, but it is a rather restricted way of living because it sees only the surface of things, it accepts only the things I can understand completely, believes only the things I find easy to explain. Or, you can do as Peter did. You can jump over the side of the boat and walk towards the Lord; you can lay down the ordinary life, happy to see it go, and take up instead a life with your mind expanded, your hopes and expectations opened up far beyond what you might have thought possible. I hope you chose the second way. I hope you will dare to be different; I hope you will dare to believe.

I send you this letter (I know it is rather long – sorry!) together with my love and prayers on this the day of your First Holy Communion.

Fr Peter