

Homily for Parishes in the Western Region without clergy

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 2nd June 2019, Easter 7

Readings: **Acts 16:16-34**

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12-22

John 17:20-26

We might be tempted to think that terrorism is a recent thing, and that before the Twin Towers were attacked in New York eighteen years ago, the world was a peaceful place. But, to think this denies the historical reality of terrorism in many places before 9/11. As I was growing up in London the Irish Republican Army used car bombs in England and Northern Ireland to kill. A pub in Guildford was bombed, a bandstand full of musicians was bombed, a train station was bombed, two trucks full of paratroopers were bombed... too many places were bombed. It was in those years that rubbish bins disappeared from railway stations because they were easy places to drop a parcel bomb.

At school we spoke naïvely about Catholics killing Protestants in retaliation for things that happened long ago. We were not aware of the complex history of politics involved, which includes the imposed English Protestant settlement of northern Ireland, and the dispossession and oppression of Irish Catholics in the process.

Maybe because of this there was a deep longing among many for a better relationship between Catholics and non-Catholics. The Second Vatican Council in the 1960's had given permission for shared dialogue, shared worship, and shared ministry that had never before been possible. So, each year in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we had shared Bible studies, and as a teenager I happily went to sung Evensong at the Church of England, Folk Mass with the Catholics, and contemporary worship at the local Methodist church. The Taize community brought together young people in their thousands to recognise the common ground of Christian faith, and the common call to love and serve others.

The longing for a better relationship between Catholics and non-Catholics also found expression in Australia. In 1984 a Covenant was signed between the Anglican and Catholic Archdioceses of Brisbane. One thousand two hundred people were present for the occasion at St John's Cathedral during which Archbishop John Grindrod and Archbishop Francis Rush embraced one another. The longing for unity expressed in today's Gospel reading, where Jesus prayed 'that they may all be one' seemed to be coming to fulfillment... But, thirty five years later there seems to be considerably less energy for Christian unity.

At a service held at St John's Cathedral last Wednesday the Anglican and Catholic Archbishops of Brisbane, together with the Catholic Bishop of Toowoomba, renewed the Covenant between the Churches at a service attended by just sixty seven people! The hymns, prayers, and symbolic action were beautiful, but as I looked out at the small congregation I wondered why there were not more people present? And... I wondered why there were so few young people?

I think there are a many reasons for this, but, I think these are the main three:

There are well established expressions of mutual respect and cooperation between Catholic and Anglican congregations and ministries, so in many ways it is old news. We know we are brothers and sisters in Christ, and though technically we are not supposed to break bread together... it happens in many places, and is a blessing.

Another reason is that though we recognise and celebrate the common ground of Christian faith there are significant differences in who we ordain for leadership. In this Anglican Diocese of Southern Queensland we can ordain both women and men Deacons, Priests, and Bishops – and these may be single, or married. But, Catholic polity allows only celibate men to be ordained priest and bishop.

Finally, and importantly, the tension between our denominations no longer creates disharmony in our society – and we can all be thankful for that!

However, where there is still religious disharmony people still gather for dialogue and peace making. In fact it seems that there is more energy for interfaith dialogue these days, than for ecumenical dialogue between Christians. It's as though we have enough sense of other Christian beliefs to live together, but we're not sure about those who are not Christian. Those in our community who are Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, and Bahai...

Compare the sixty seven people who gathered to witness the signing of the Anglican-Catholic Covenant last week, and the thousands who gathered at the Islamic College of Brisbane earlier this year after the massacre in Christchurch. Or, the thousands who gathered in at the University of Southern Queensland in 2015 after an arson attack on the Toowoomba Mosque.

Many people in the wider community will mobilise when they perceive that there is injustice... and I think much money is spent on hiding injustice because of this. I think we'd agree that our relationship with God is not just about keeping our lives sweet – it's also about making the lives of others... sweeter! So, what injustice, societal issue, or community need – moves you, & moves me - to some form of action?

In the reading from Acts today there is an extraordinary account of Paul freeing a young woman from being exploited, and then paying a heavy price for this. Paul was falsely accused by those who had made a profit from the young woman, and because of this was publicly stripped, beaten, and thrown into prison. There is a reminder here that it can be costly to be involved in the liberation of another person. No matter how good the intention, and no matter how inspired by God's Spirit, people can deliberately misunderstand, misrepresent, and punish.

Try and imagine being with Paul and his friend Silas through that experience. Imagine being battered and bruised; and chained up in a prison cell, uncertain about what's going to happen the next day. I think I'd be feeling a bit sorry for myself, but the reading tells us that Paul and Silas were praying aloud and were singing hymns to God. You don't get what the reading calls 'a severe flogging' without black-eyes, split lips, and deep tissue injury... but, they were praying aloud, and singing hymns to God!

Don't get me wrong – God did not leave them there. There was an earthquake, their chains fell off, and the jailer and his whole family came to faith. But, the jailer washed their wounds – he did not take the wounds away. No matter how good the intention, and no matter how inspired by God's Spirit, it can be a costly thing to be involved in the liberation of another person, and it will always demand something of us.

So, what injustice, societal issue, or community need – moves you, and moves me - to some form of action? If you already know the answer to that question - God bless, guide and sustain you in the journey. But, if you're not sure... I reckon it's worth taking into prayer.

Let's pray now... Holy God, thank you for Jesus and for the way he brought hope and love to those considered least by the society of his time. Through your Spirit please help us to be hope bringers, and love givers in our time. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.