

Homily for Parishes in the Western region without clergy

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 29th September 2019 – Pentecost 16

Readings: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

This is a homily written by Bishop Cam to share today. He writes:

It was the Toowoomba Carnival of Flowers last weekend and there was much to see and do as visitors came from far and wide to visit gardens, listen to music, and share food together. In the midst of all the good memories from those days I was particularly struck by what I think of as a ‘Kingdom characteristic’ in two of the Anglican Parishes that I spent time with.

In the middle of preaching a sermon last Sunday morning I had a surprise. A man sitting in the front row leaned out from where he was sitting, took hold of my stole, and started stroking it. He affirmed that he liked my stole, and he didn’t seem keen to let it go! I assured him that I also liked the stole, that it came from Bolivia, and had been a gift from my father in law. After he relinquished the stole I took two paces back so I was out of reach and returned to the sermon, grateful that I had printed the full text. There were smiles all round from the congregation, so clearly this man was known and valued by those present.

At the end of the sermon I prayed and as soon as I’d said, ‘Amen!’ the man rushed out of his pew and hugged me firmly saying, loud enough for all to hear, ‘I like you!’ There was a collective and gentle ‘Ahh!’ from the congregation, and then someone came forward to gently lead the man back to his seat.

A few days earlier in another Parish I met a person that I’d seen sleeping in a porch throughout winter under a blanket and an old Drizabone. In the way that people sat with him during and after the service, and welcomed him to the fine cheese and wine hospitality of a Carnival event, it was clear that he was also known and valued.

As a Christian leader it is inspiring and reassuring to see in many congregations the different ways that vulnerable people are included in worship, hospitality and community life. However, I think what happens in worship on a Sunday morning is the easier part! Ensuring that people with physical frailty are able to come to church can mean transporting them to and from their home, as well as helping them up the steps, or the ramp, at church. Sharing life with those people between Sundays as they face the practical challenges of shopping, or the emotional challenges of loneliness demands much more of us as individuals and as a community.

The Gospel reading today suggest strongly that how we respond and engage with people who are poor and vulnerable is really important... to God. Jesus tells the story of a nameless rich man who ignores the needs of a poor and sick man called Lazarus who lies at his gate each day. While the rich man eats well, the text says ‘feasted sumptuously’, Lazarus longs for the left-overs... but gets nothing. There is that very evocative phrase to amplify just how vulnerable Lazarus was, ‘even the dogs would come and lick his sores!’ In a society that had no government welfare, no hospitals, and no aged care facilities the responsibility of caring for the sick would fall on family members. The inference is that Lazarus had nobody – he was physically sick, with sores on his skin, and no one to care for him... no one to value him... no one to say, ‘You matter to me!’

In his story Jesus suggested that the poor man died and went to heaven for an eternity with Abraham in the presence of God. He also suggested that when the rich man died he did not go to heaven but instead found himself in the fiery torment of hell. The rich man saw the situation and asked Abraham to send

Lazarus down to hell with some water so that his life would be a little easier. It's kind of embarrassing to read and listen to! The rich man was not sorry that he didn't respond to the needs that Lazarus clearly had in his earthly life – but instead continues to think selfishly. Can you just send Lazarus down here with some water! Then, less selfishly, can you just send Lazarus to my brothers to warn them so that they can change their behaviour! Abraham responded, and I paraphrase – “Sorry kid, you had your chance, and your brothers have the teaching of Moses and the prophets.”

The inference is really clear: if you are a follower of Jesus then responding to, and meeting, human need is really important. There is no escape clause! If we are followers of Jesus Christ we are clearly called to be less selfish and more generous; less indifferent and more compassionate; less apathetic and more engaged. This insight is powerfully articulated in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is remembered talking about a final judgement in which people will be held to account for the ways that they responded to human need in their life, “...when I was hungry, you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.”

I am not suggesting that we earn God's approval by doing good things... although it would be possible to infer this from the text! I am saying that our faith in Jesus calls us to engage with the reality of human need and use our time, gifts, and resources to make a difference for good. In the words from Paul's first letter to Timothy today we are, “to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share...” (1Timothy 6:18).

When we have a sense of being called by God to engage with human need there can be a fear that it may be costly, that it may take us out of our comfort zone, and that it may overwhelm us in some way. These are all valid fears and justifiable concerns whether we're supporting someone through tough treatment for cancer, lending a hand to a neighbour with some form of dementia, or working with a newly arrived refugee family while they find their feet. But if we have sense, in prayer, that God is calling us to that engagement, whether it be a one off activity, or a relationship that becomes life-long - we need to trust God. We need to trust that with God it'll be OK... it might even be the most important thing we ever do!

Three years ago my wife, Kate, rolled out of a plane at 14,000ft to raise much needed funds for a fantastic local charity, called Bella Rae magazine, that works to empower young women. In the minutes before leaving the plane Kate's experienced tandem skydiver tightened the straps that joined them together, and face first Kate rolled out of the plane trusting that all would be well. I was on the ground so did not see those moments before leaving the plane until I watched the video that night. I think in our journey of life and faith there are moments like this when we have to trust we are securely strapped-in through our relationship with Christ. Secure in this we will live often counter-cultural lives, engaging with the vulnerable in ways that are mutually transforming, and day after day... we will, metaphorically at least, roll out of the plane!

Let's pray...

“Most loving God we give thanks for the many ways you have blessed us, and have called us to be a blessing in the lives of others. We ask that you transform and guide our hearts and minds each day trusting that, somehow, in you it all makes sense. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen”