

Homily for Parishes in the Western region without clergy

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 6th October 2019 – Pentecost 17

Readings: Lamentations 1:1-6
2 Timothy 1:1-14

Psalm 137
Luke 17:(1-4) 5-10

Every Monday morning in my last Parish I met together with the clergy team and wardens for discussion, planning, and prayer. We'd always finish with the Monday Morning Office which concludes with an affirmation based on two of the verses in this week's Epistle reading, *"God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. May we rekindle the gift of God within us."* As the ministry team affirmed this each week it became very significant, but which part of the affirmation spoke most strongly depended on what we were travelling with in life and ministry that week.

Since moving to the Western Region five years ago I've received the Morning Prayer affirmation in some unprompted text-messages from three members of that ministry team. Each time I've read them I've thought, 'Ah, yes! It must be Monday!' On one occasion I really needed to hear, "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice!" On another occasion I needed to hear and reflect on the term "self-discipline", and on another, the responsibility to "rekindle the gift of God within."

There are any number of reasons why we can feel flat and need to 'rekindle the gift of God within!' It would be fair to say that the person who wrote the designated Psalm for today was feeling a bit flat! *"By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept: when we remembered Zion... How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"* The commentaries suggest that the Jewish elite who had been deported from Jerusalem to Babylon in 597BC were treated well and prospered. But, though they were allowed to meet together and buy property, the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed; they were a long way from the place they thought of as home; and they were not free.

I wonder how many of our brothers and sisters who come as refugees and asylum seekers have similar thoughts, and ask themselves the question, *"How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"* In the Diocese of Brisbane we are fortunate to have six Sudanese congregations who are singing the Lord's song in a strange land. They do this in English and Dinka, in Nuer and Arabic, with dance and drums, with prayer and loud singing. The Diocesan annual return statistics indicate that those six congregations represent about 6% of all those who worship each Sunday in the Diocese of Brisbane... which suggests that they are singing the Lord's song well in this land.

Much harder for those asylum seekers held in detention on Manus and Nauru. As I understand from people who have visited and worked there about half of all those held in detention are Iranian Christians escaping persecution. They have been supported by the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Nauru, and by the Catholic Church in Manus but it is hard to sing the Lord's song when the way forward is not clear, and you have been robbed of hope. Please hold in prayer all being held on Nauru and Manus, and that a country somewhere will give them a future in which they can flourish.

Whether we've come to Australia as refugees escaping persecution, or as migrants seeking a better life - there are always things to learn – and challenges that can leave us feeling inadequate and discouraged. But this is also true for all people born in Australia and who have called no other country home. Things happen in life that can leave us feeling inadequate and discouraged... even battered and

broken. What can we do in those times? I think the last part of that Monday Morning Prayer affirmation offers some wisdom – *“May we rekindle the gift of God within us.”*

I think the words ‘May we...’ are liberating, because they suggest that we can choose to do this if we want to. We can choose to rekindle the gift of God within us. Of course some definition of that gift would be important and I think there would be at least two ways to understand it. The first is the belief that our lives are an incredible gift from God. Our lives are certainly biological and we each have a genetic inheritance – but surely each breath and heart-beat is also a gift. Psalm 139 seems grounded in this belief when it affirms, “...you have created my inward parts: you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” So to be physically, emotionally, and psychologically healthy rekindles each day this gift of God within us.

But there is also the understanding and experience of God’s Spirit within us as being a gift from God. Experienced by some in the early Church as flames of fire it is easy to see where the language of rekindling comes from. If the flames of God’s Spirit have burnt down into dimly glowing embers, why would we not seek the breath of God so that the flames burn once again? Why would we not want the Spirit to be more present in our lives drawing us into deeper relationship with God and with others; enabling us to live our lives with purpose and hope; and have a clearer sense of peace about who we are and what we are doing?

A question I often ask people is, “What gives you energy?” and I’m thrilled at the variety of responses I’ve been given over the years. For some it’s being with people, while for others it’s time alone! For some it’s gardening, while for others it’s walking the dog! For some it’s playing an instrument, while for others it’s reading. Whatever it is... the next question is important! How often do we do this? How often do we choose to do the things that give us energy to live fulfilling lives? How often do we rekindle this aspect of God’s gift within us?

And what particularly feeds our relationship with God? Do we prefer to pray by ourselves or with another? Do we read the Bible in a systematic way, with the expectation that we will learn something when we do this? What songs and hymns do we listen to and sing along with, that nourish us in faith and help us to sing the Lord’s song in this strange, but beautiful, land?

I reckon if we’re honest, we’ve all got work to do on this.

Let’s pray... “Awesome God, thank you for the gift of our lives, and the gift of your Spirit. Please help us recognise what we need to let go of, and what we need to do more of... so that your will be done on earth, in our lives. Amen.”