

Homily – Epiphany 2 – 19.01.20

There is a beautiful poem that I had on the wall of my study for some years which reads, 'Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours, Yours are the eyes through which to look out Christ's compassion to the world; yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good; Yours are the hands with which he is to bless people now.' The words are attributed to the sixteenth century saint and mystic Teresa of Avila, who was a Spanish Carmelite nun.

I think the message of the poem challenges the thinking that all we have to do to fix the many problems of the world is pray and that in response God will supernaturally change things for the better. Instead the poem helpfully suggests that Christ brings blessing to the world through the way that we care for others, but unhelpfully infers that this is the only way Christ can be at work.

If we read the poem literally it can unconsciously put a lot of pressure on us as individuals! 'Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours...'

Even when we broaden the poem to the collective affirmation, 'Christ has no body now on earth but yours and mine; no hands but yours and mine; no feet but yours and mine...' the sense of responsibility can feel a bit overwhelming! I can support half a dozen families who are struggling with the reality of ongoing drought, but what about the tens of thousands for whom this is a lived reality? I can reach out to three families that have been impacted by fires but in New South Wales alone two thousand one hundred families have lost their homes.

'Though we are each part of the body of Christ, it's fair to say that we are each very small in the scheme of things! That's not to say God doesn't have work for us, we just need to keep things in perspective!

At a bush fire vigil held at St Francis College last week a little story was read which the Kenyan Nobel prize winner, Wangari Maathai used to tell:

The story starts with an enormous fire, which breaks out and rages through the forest. All the animals fled to the edge of the forest - all except a tiny hummingbird. 'I will do something about this fire,' said the tiny bird. So, it flew to the nearest stream and dove beneath the surface. Rising into the air it carried a bead of water in its beak which it then released into the flames. The fire was huge, but over and over the hummingbird flew to the stream to collect water and drop it on the fire, and each time the bird believed the drop would make a difference.

The other animals - some with large trunks and large mouths - laughed at the diminutive creature. 'What do you think you're doing? They jeered. 'You're only a hummingbird. You can see how big the fire is. Do you think you are doing any good at all? Tired of their discouraging words and inaction, the hummingbird turned to the other animals as it prepared to fly back to the river again and said, 'I'm doing the best I can!'

Maathai suggests that 'though we may feel like hummingbirds, we never the less have to take our small beaks and carry beads of water, droplets of change, to where they are needed, and do it over and over again, notwithstanding the odds or indifference from those more powerful than us...' 'In the end', Maathai concludes, 'all we are called to do is the best we can.'

I reckon John the Baptist in today's Gospel would have felt a bit small in the scheme of things for he lived in an occupied country in which the religious and political leadership appears to have been corrupt and self-interested. Yet - he did the best he could. He called people to repent from a selfish way of being to a way of being that was focussed on God, and he baptised people in the river Jordan. A river that was so small we would have called it a creek in Australia.

Then Jesus showed up and asked to be baptised and the Gospel tells us that John intuitively knew that Jesus was the one who would make all the difference. John baptised Jesus and the next day told his followers that he could only do a little whereas Jesus could do much, much more. He quite literally pointed people to Jesus suggesting that he was the one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit.

It could have been tempting for John to take a bit of credit. He could have said, 'You want to know what happened when I baptised Jesus? I'll tell you! Jesus experienced God in a powerful way when I lifted him out of the water and this seemed to launch him into a new chapter of life! I did that!'

Of course we understand that John said none of this! He did not point people to himself, but rather he pointed them to Jesus - to God - and for the first time called him 'the Lamb of God' with all of the implication for sacrifice that go with this.

I hope that this year we can each have something of this focus in our lives: that we have the humility to point people more to Jesus than to ourselves.

John the Baptist's friend and follower, Andrew, went to listen to Jesus that afternoon and was so convicted by what he heard that when he went home, he told his brother Simon that he had found the longed for anointed one called Messiah. Andrew was so convincing that his brother went to meet with Jesus himself and became one of his closest followers.

So maybe I should broaden my hope for this year! May you and I, like John the Baptist, have the humility to point people more to Jesus than ourselves. And, in God's grace, may we be renewed in the conviction that faith in Christ enables us to live life in an extraordinarily fulfilling way; such that like Andrew we want to tell others about it.

May we recognise the humming bird like potential we each have to make a small difference for good and be inspired by God's Spirit to work collectively with others to make a more just, loving, and peaceful world.

Amen.