

Homily – 01-03-20 – Lent 1

Last Wednesday, at the end of a long day, I drove down to the local Caltex to get some fuel. It was coming up to 9pm as I walked across the concrete to pay for the fuel and as I did this a very dishevelled person asked someone coming out of the shop if they could give him some money. That well-dressed person apologised and hurried off to their car while I walked past avoiding eye contact so I wouldn't be asked the same question!

As I was paying for the fuel the dishevelled person came in and stood in front of the grocery shelves muttering to himself while jingling two coins in his hand. He was barefoot, his clothes were dirty, and his hair was unwashed. I realised as I paid for the fuel that I had a five dollar note in my wallet so I went to the man and gave it to him saying, 'Please have this!'

He looked startled, before giving this huge smile. Then he stepped forward and wrapped both of his arms around me in a big hug saying, 'Bro-th-er!' It was my turn to look startled, but I hugged him back, and was enveloped in the smell of stale sweat and urine. We both stepped back smiling and shook hands. A long history of hard times was etched in his face and I wondered where he was going to sleep that night.

As I turned to go he called, 'Bro!' and I stopped and turned back. He said, 'Don't let the bad guys get you down!' and he raised his eyebrows at me like an elder passing on wisdom to someone who needed to hear it. I thanked him for the good advice and laughed because he didn't say 'bad guys' he used another word which I don't hear very often!

When I got into the car my clothes reeked of this man, so I had the windows down all the way home, but I smiled all the way. It had been a wonderful way to finish Ash Wednesday and begin the journey of Lent! The next day I shared with a Brisbane friend what had happened and the thought that maybe I had unexpectedly met Christ when I went to get fuel at Caltex. He gently teased me by saying, 'and you only gave him five bucks!'

I think my friend has a point because five bucks is really nothing. Simply the cost of a good cup of coffee. The next time it'd be good for me to ask a person in similar circumstance if they'd like a meal. But I think there was something in what happened that was more valuable than a dollar amount. The person did not ask for help, a generous hug was exchanged, and wisdom for life's journey was offered!

Reflecting on the encounter I think there is a gentle challenge from God for me to be a little more mindful about what's going on in the lives of those around me, and to recognise the daily opportunities there are to encourage and be encouraged. I wonder if this challenge of being more mindful resonates with you and if it does, invite you to join me in giving this focus during the weeks of Lent.

As if that unexpected Caltex encounter was not enough of a gift, I have been wonderfully challenged by a verse from this week's Old Testament reading. It describes the second of the creation stories and goes on to imagine how things went wrong between God and humanity.

In the first creation story God is described creating 'humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them...' (Gen.1:27) but in the second God puts the first

man into a deep sleep, removes one of his ribs, and forms the first woman (Gen. 2:21-23). Now we know that men and women have an equal number of ribs and this gives a clue that both stories are not meant to be taken literally but are ways that an ancient people articulated the belief that God was the creator of all things.

But it's not the creation stories that have struck me this week, it is the line which suggests why God made humanity. It's almost hidden because it moves swiftly into some interesting narrative but it's worth pondering. Verse fifteen says, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till and keep it." Now I may be reading this with an unconscious gardener's bias but the inference seems to be that we are made by God to till the earth and keep it!

In 1988 the Lambeth Conference formally adopted five marks of mission, and the first four of these are about people: We are to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; teach, baptise and nurture new believers; respond to human need by loving service; and transform unjust structures of society. But the fifth mark suggests that part of the mission is to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

This fifth mark of mission really resonates with this week's challenging thought from Genesis that we are made by God to till the earth and keep it. Most of the Church's energy and effort has traditionally focussed on the first four marks of mission: proclaiming Good News; making disciples; caring for those in need; and working for justice.

So, in the coming weeks of Lent I want to reflect on this missional call to safeguard the integrity of creation and develop a Christian understanding of ecological sustainability. Again, I invite you to join me in this while recognising it may take us into new and uncomfortable territory... even metaphorical wilderness! However, we'll journey knowing that God walks with us wherever we travel and sometimes it is in wilderness that we'll find profound encounter and deeper relationship.

Friends, let's pray...

Gracious God we give thanks for the gift of our lives, and the gift of your love. We give thanks for unexpected places of encounter and ask for your blessing as we journey and learn this week. Help us to be mindful of you and of those we share life with; and help us to better appreciate the natural world in which we live. We pray in the name of the one who travelled in wilderness, Jesus the Christ. Amen.