

Homily – 02-03-20 – Lent 2

A recurring headline of the news each day is the latest number of people known to be infected by the Corona Virus, also known as COVID-19. State by State in Australia, and country by country in the world, we hear the statistics of known infection and mortality. As I write the World Health Organisation suggests that there could be as many as 100,000 people across the world who are currently infected, and that this rate will rise exponentially in the coming weeks and months.

We have every right to feel unsettled about this reality because it will not only effect our economy, our health system, and our way of life, it is likely that this virus will cause someone we love to die. The most vulnerable group, or the demographic with the highest rate of mortality, are those in our community over the age of seventy... and we have all got loved ones that age, or we may be in that stage of life ourselves.

Clearly there is something going on that we don't have enough information about to effectively control. We do not yet have a vaccine for COVID-19, and we don't know where the person we stand beside in the shops, or sit beside in church, has been! Have they, or has a relative of theirs, travelled overseas recently? When they coughed, or sneezed, did they share something more than an apology? And, when they shook our hand, or touched that handrail, did they inadvertently leave something behind?

Some humourists have posted on Facebook, 'Just Wash Your Hands - and Carry On!' I really like that but would probably want to add the words 'frequently' and 'thoroughly'! So, it would then read, 'Just wash your hands frequently and thoroughly - and carry on!'

For many in our community there is a great deal of fear about what this virus might do. Face masks in chemists and hardware stores have sold out, and hand sanitiser has become a precious commodity! In some ways the sale of these is not a surprise, but there has also been bulk buying of toilet paper and non-perishable food. Clearly people are afraid and are anticipating a time when shops and public places will be closed. Fear can lead people to do extraordinary things... like buying thirty-six rolls of toilet paper in one shop!

I think Nicodemus in today's Gospel was afraid - and he was afraid of two things. The first is obvious because he came to see Jesus at night when he could not easily be seen by others. John's Gospel tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jewish community which means he was a well-educated, well-respected man that the Jewish community looked to for answers. This would have been particularly true when it came to interpreting the Hebrew sacred writing of Torah, what we call the first five books of the Old Testament.

We understand from the Gospels that through his words and actions Jesus challenged the traditional interpretation of Torah as taught by the Pharisees. The Pharisees had developed and articulated six hundred and thirteen laws that people had to keep in order to be right with God. More than this the Pharisees had the responsibility of interpreting and applying those religious laws and through this defined who was in and who was out.

Time and again Jesus challenged Pharisaic teaching and this is well expressed in an encounter described in Mark's Gospel. In this Jesus is remembered saying to a group of Pharisees that, 'The

Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath...'(Mark 2:27). The inference here being that religious laws are created to enrich and enable relationship with God, but when we make keeping religious laws the most important thing in life we may lose sight of their purpose.

For Nicodemus then, visiting Jesus was clearly a high-risk thing. If it became known that he had visited this itinerant heretic he could have lost his status, identity and income in the Jewish community... but, he came anyway. Certainly, he came at night so that the risk of being seen was reduced, but he came anyway... and we might helpfully wonder, 'Why?'

I think the reason Nicodemus risked association with Jesus was because he was afraid that he might be wrong about what God wanted from human beings. What he and other Pharisees taught was that one of the main things that God desired was ritual purity for many of the laws defined how to become impure, and how to correct this through animal sacrifice. With many laws suggesting that some forms of impurity were unforgiveable to the degree that the person's life would be forfeit.

Remember that deeply disturbing exchange in John's Gospel which describes a group of Pharisees dragging a woman before Jesus demanding that he judge her guilty so that she could be stoned to death (John 8:3-11)? And remember his thoughtful response, 'Let anyone among you without sin throw the first stone...'

Nicodemus came to Jesus because he was afraid that his understanding of God's love was too small and too conditional. Clearly God was at work in the life of Jesus because God kept doing extraordinary things through him. The sick were healed and the hungry fed, and there was a generosity in those who received these things because they were not limited to those who were Jewish, those who believed themselves to be the chosen. There was a Centurion, there was the Syro-Phoenecian woman, there was the Samaritan woman at the well.

Nicodemus risked coming to Jesus because it seems he wanted to know more and Jesus reassured him and challenged him suggesting that in order to see things the way God sees things there are things that we can do and there are things that God does. The water he spoke of clearly suggests Baptism and that flows on into other activity in a life of faith that includes prayer, and study, and service of others. But, Jesus also spoke of the importance of God's Spirit which is something we have no control over, but is present and potentially active throughout our lives.

Perhaps in this Lent we may have the courage to be a little more like Nicodemus and risk wanting to know more about Jesus and a life of faith. For some there may be a yearning to reach out to God in Christ for the first time, while for others there may be a yearning to reconnect having lost touch for a while. Maybe you have a clear sense of Christ and God's Spirit in your life each day, and this overflows into every aspect of your life already... and if this is so, bless your heart.

For me, I know I have some work to do, and intend to risk finding more about Jesus and a life of faith in the midst of challenging times.

God's blessing on your journey and mine.
Amen.