

**Homily – 09-08-2020, Pentecost 10 - Bishop Cam Venables**

Readings: Genesis 37:1-4,12-28 Psalm

105:1-6, 16-22

Romans 10:4-15 Matthew 14:22-36

I think we have all been deeply moved by the images from Beirut over the last week, and the statistics have been shocking. Somehow two thousand seven hundred and fifty tonnes of ammonium nitrate detonated with an explosive force equivalent to one thousand five hundred tonnes of TNT. At least one hundred and thirty-seven people have been killed, at least five thousand injured, and more than three hundred thousand have become homeless.

'Though the statistics are mind-boggling it has been the human stories that have been the most moving. Clips of video taken of a warehouse on fire, which then exploded, before a shock wave raced towards the holders of the phones, and then... carnage. One video clip was of a church service in which a priest was censuring the congregation. First the lights went out, and the priest kept calmly censuring until, moments later, the ceiling of the church collapsed on top of him and the gathered congregation. Survivors have spoken about how they narrowly escaped being killed, and how neighbours have reached out in many generous ways to support one another.

The people of Lebanon, already struggling with economic collapse and the impact of COVID-19, have a very difficult journey ahead of them.

There is a saying that, 'God will not give us anything more than we can handle' - and 'though it is often used, I don't think it is helpful or true. For one thing it suggests that God is responsible for everything destructive in the life of a person or community; and for another it suggests that we should individually have the fortitude to deal with whatever happens in our life by ourselves.

Is God responsible for the detonation of that explosive material in Lebanon, and that God expects several hundred thousand people to cope with the destruction? Or, was there gross negligence by leaders, who allowed the explosive material to sit and deteriorate? And for the many who have lost family members, friends, colleagues, homes, and workplaces... surely, we have no expectation that they must stoically cope by themselves?

I think stuff happens in human life that takes us way beyond what we can handle by ourselves, and it is unhelpful and destructive to think that we should cope with that sort of experience in isolation. It doesn't have to be an explosion that causes our life to be torn apart... and I think each of us would have had something that has taken us beyond what we have been able to cope with alone? It may have been a cancer diagnosis; a relationship breakdown; a redundancy; a long struggle to find and sustain employment; an long experience of being bullied or abused; an injury; and accident; a death?

The truth is that myriad things can happen which knock the stuffing out of us and leave us broken and unable to keep going. Surely the suggestion that God has done this to us knowing we will discover an internal resilience previously hidden is at odds with the understanding of God that Jesus offers.

Today's Gospel describes Jesus taking time out to pray in the midst of a busy period of ministry and this is worth noting because often we focus on the action part of the story and forget the priority

that Jesus gave to prayer.

We are told that Jesus had dismissed the crowds and had told the disciples to go on ahead of him to their next destination so he could have some time out. In the midst of a busy and meaningful life a time for solitude and prayer so that batteries could be recharged. There's something in this for all of us inclined to fill our living with activity.

Then the action part of the story we remember best!

The disciples were travelling to their next destination in a boat and that's not a big surprise because many of them were fishermen. Those fishermen knew how to travel by boat and had developed the necessary skills since they were young. So, for them I don't imagine too much anxiety when, as the Gospel suggests, the boat was battered by the waves and the wind was against them. However, for those in the boat who were not fishermen I do imagine some anxiety because things were looking rough and were out of their control.

Into that experience - familiar to fishermen and unfamiliar to the rest - Jesus appeared walking towards them on the water and not surprisingly they were all pretty freaked out. They thought that what they were seeing was not Jesus but rather a ghost.

In response Jesus reassured them - and Peter responded to this in a most surprising way. Instead of asking Jesus to hurry over and get in the boat Peter asked Jesus to call him out of the boat to walk on the water. Out from the familiar and safe place of the boat onto the water where he was likely to drown. And Jesus, said to Peter, 'Come!'

Come away from what is familiar and safe; come away from what you've always known and done; ...and risk something new! And we're told that Peter got out of the boat and started to walk on the water. What faith to leave the boat and respond to that call to risk something new. I think there's something for us to consider in this - as individuals, as congregations, and as a church. Because I think Jesus - now the Christ - still says 'Come... come and risk something new!'

As he walked on the water we are told that Peter looked around at the waves and realised that this was way outside of his experience and comfort zone so he started to sink and in desperation called out, 'Lord, save me!'

The response of Jesus is important to note because he did not fold his arms and say, 'Come on Peter, I know you can handle this! Just take a deep breath and climb back onto the surface of the water!'

Rather, the Gospel says that immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught Peter before he went under the waves.

One of the gifts in this Gospel then is that when we feel overwhelmed by things we can, like Peter, cry out in prayer, 'Lord, save me!' That we can reach out to God, and reach out to others, for help until we are back in the 'boat'. For the people of Lebanon and for all who have need in our world I think this is true, and it gives hope.

But there is also the gift in this Gospel reading, perhaps a more unsettling gift, that as individuals and as a Church God sometimes calls us out of the boat, away from familiar ways of thinking and doing,

into new ways of being.

In God's grace, I wonder which of these gifts speak most clearly to you at this time: the promise of help when life is overwhelming; or, the call to something new?

Friends, let's pray:

Life-giving God,

we give thanks for your love and call,

and for the way we can meet you in prayer

no matter what is going on in our lives.

We ask your blessing on sisters and brothers in Beirut at this time;

and on all whose lives have been torn apart by COVID-19.

We ask this in the name of the one who calmed the storm,

Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen