

Homily – 30-08-20 – Pentecost 13 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

In last week's Gospel when Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, Peter said, 'You are the Messiah, Son of the Living God!' It was a great answer and Jesus affirmed the response, before giving Peter authority to develop the future Church. However, this week's Gospel remembers Peter completely misunderstanding something important.

When Jesus explained that he would go to Jerusalem and suffer, and be killed, and rise... Peter took him to one side and suggested that suffering and death were not necessary. In response Jesus gave Peter a stinging rebuke with the words, 'Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block for me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' I imagine Peter being fairly subdued for a while after that!

Before any of the disciples could think that it was only Jesus who had to suffer, Jesus continued, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Maybe these verses should be put on every Baptism and Confirmation certificate as a reminder that denial and suffering are going to be part of our pilgrimage. Christian faith is not an insurance policy that will protect us from tough times. There will be tough times - but God will be with us as we journey with them and through them.

When Matthew's Gospel was written, and most scholars suggest this was between fifty-five and sixty-five years after Jesus lived, it was tough to be known as a follower of Jesus. Both Jews and Christians were persecuted by Roman authorities, but Christians in particular were singled out and maybe this was because they claimed to follow a king.

This Wednesday, on the 2nd September, our Anglican Lectionary encourages us to remember and give thanks for the New Guinea Martyrs. Those women and men who stayed in Papua New Guinea during the Second World War because of their faith in Christ. Some of them came from Parishes in this Diocese and these include the teacher Mavis Parkinson from St Paul's, Ipswich, and the Revd John Barge who served as a priest in the Parish of St James, Toowoomba.

With the threat of Japanese invasion it would have been tempting to leave PNG, and return to the relative safety of Australia, but, the Anglican Bishop of New Guinea, Philip Strong, spoke powerfully to his staff via a radio broadcast on the 31st January 1942. In this he drew from today's Gospel and I'd like to share some of his reflection with. Bishop Strong said:

"...I would like a heart-to-heart talk with you. As far as I know, you are all at your posts and I am very glad and thankful about this. I have from the first felt that we must endeavour to carry on our work in all circumstances no matter what the cost may ultimately be to any of us individually. God expects this of us. The Church at home, which sent us out, will surely expect it of us. The Universal Church expects it. The tradition and history of missions requires it of us. Missionaries who have been faithful to the uttermost and are now at rest are surely expecting it of us.

The people whom we serve expect it of us. We could never hold up our faces again, if, for our own safety, we all forsook Him and fled when the shadows of the Passion began to gather around Him in His Spiritual Body, the Church in Papua. Our life in the future would be burdened with shame and we could not come back here and face our people again; and we would be conscious always of rejected opportunities.

The history of the Church tells us that missionaries do not think of themselves in the hour of danger and crisis, but of the Master who called them to give their all, and of the people they have been trusted to serve and love to the uttermost. His watchword is none the less true today, as it was when he gave it to the first disciples, 'Whosoever will save his life will lose it, and whosoever will lose his life

for my sake and the Gospel shall find it."

Clearly for Bishop Strong and for all the staff who stayed there was an understanding that faith in Christ would mean the denial of comfort, the risk of suffering, and the possibility of an untimely death. So, we can, with the Church around the world, give thanks this week for the courage and faithfulness of the New Guinea martyrs.

But, what about us in our time? What denial and suffering are we willing to accept and endure because of our faith in Christ? I think there are significant clues in today's reading from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. I don't think the verses need much unpacking because they potentially speak clearly to us, both as individuals and as congregations.

Let's spend time with those words from Paul, and I'll annotate as we go!

Paul said, "Let love be genuine..." and I interpret this to mean that we are not to fake love in the relationships we have with one another. If we believe that we're related to each other in Christ, and that we are brothers and sisters in God's grace... how well do we know each other? How willing are we for our lives to be woven together in genuine friendship? Is there genuine love in the way we speak about and treat each other? And if there are obvious shortcomings... how can we change? How can we improve?

Paul continues, "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer..." I think those last three speak powerfully to us who have had our lives disrupted by COVID, and by very necessary restrictions: 'Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer...'

Paul suggests that we "...Contribute to the needs of the saints..." which infers hospitality and generosity to those we like, but goes on to suggest that we, "...extend hospitality to strangers..." This clearly suggests that we are also called to share hospitality and generosity with those we've just met for the first time.

Paul continues, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them..." and I wonder if Paul was living in the real world as he wrote this! I'd much rather ignore those who have persecuted me; have nothing more to do with them; physically hurt them; or take them to court! Yet there is an undeniable alignment between Paul and Jesus about this. It is counter-cultural and incredibly hard, but it is also a strategy that potentially breaks a never-ending cycle of violence.

I think it's important to contextualise this exhortation because it should never be used as an excuse for bullying, abuse, or oppression of any kind... to remain unchallenged.

Paul wrote, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep..." and I think this often demands more empathy and compassion, than we are naturally capable of... But, God's Spirit sustains, shapes, and enables and like Peter we sometimes do this well and sometimes less so.

Paul encouraged the church in Rome to, "Live in harmony with one another; to not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; to not claim to be wiser than they were. To not repay anyone evil for evil and take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. And, if it is possible... to live peaceably with all..."

I think it would be worthwhile for each of us to read this portion of Paul's letter to Rome each day this week and invite God's Spirit to speak to us through it.

How different would our personal relationships be if we followed these directions better? How different would we treat each other in our church communities and congregations if we genuinely tried to follow these suggestions? And, how would our society be transformed, and even the relationships between nations, if these suggestions became guiding principles?

In all the nitty gritty of the coming week may God give us the grace to genuinely love those we share life with; may we hate what is evil, and hold fast to what is good; may we bless all and curse none; may we be hospitable to both friend and stranger; rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and

persevere in prayer.

And I offer this prayer in the name of the one who said, 'Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me...' Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen