

Homily 08-11-20 – Pentecost 23 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25, Psalm 78:1-7, 1 Thessalonians 4:9-18, Matthew 25:1-13

Friends - I invite you to imagine that you've been told by your doctor that you have an incurable disease, and that because of this you only have six months to live! In the light of this new knowledge, what would you do differently in your life to what you are currently doing? Who are the people that you'd want to spend time with, or reach out to? What are the things that you'd want to do? And, where are the places you'd want to visit... before you die?

In a brilliant song titled 'If today was your last day', the Canadian band, Nickelback, makes this hypothetical question more intense by asking 'If you only had twenty-four hours to live, what would you do?' The refrain asks questions and makes suggestions:

"If today was your last day and tomorrow was too late, could you say goodbye to yesterday?

Would you live each moment like your last; leave old pictures in the past; donate every dime you have?

Would you call old friends you never see? Reminisce old memories...

Would you forgive your enemies?"

Of the two possibilities I prefer the six-month scenario to the twenty-four hour one, because hopefully there'd be time to get over the shock and do something productive. Perhaps for some of you the response would be that you'd do nothing different while for others there may already be a sense that you've been putting something off and in that new reality would attend to it! The uncomfortable clarity could be a helpful catalyst to reframe priorities, in lives that often have unfinished business, frayed edges, and a longing for greater wholeness.

In today's Gospel Jesus is remembered telling a parable that suggests we can never be sure how long we've got, and to make living a life of faith something we do now, and not something we put off to a later date.

'The Kingdom of heaven' is a recurring theme in Matthew which variously suggests it is like a mustard seed (Mt 13:31-32); like yeast mixed with flour (Mt 13:34); and like treasure hidden in a field (Mt 13:44)... But in today's Gospel Jesus suggests that, 'The Kingdom of heaven will be like ten bridesmaids who are waiting for the bridegroom to come.'

In this story five of the bridesmaids were wise and brought flasks of reserve oil for their lamps just in case the bridegroom was delayed; while the other five did not bring reserve oil because they assumed that the bridegroom would arrive on time! Long after the expected time the bridegroom arrived and the bridesmaids who had prepared for this went out to see him with their lamps lit and became part of the celebration. While, the ones who had brought no spare oil ended up missing out on the party!

The implication is that an aspect of 'the Kingdom' involves a future celebration, which the resurrected Christ, 'the bridegroom', will host. And that if we are to be ready for this, we are to keep shining our light, because we don't want to miss out on something that good!

However, I think there is another aspect to 'the Kingdom' hinted at in this parable which is about recognising Christ in the present. In our communion service we make the three-fold affirmation, 'Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!' and in these remember Christ being someone in the past (who has died); someone in the present (who is risen); and someone in the future (who will come again).

But I wonder if the affirmation of Christ present is adequately affirmed in the words 'Christ is risen'? When we make this affirmation do we think of Christ risen from the dead, or Christ risen and ascended into heaven? Whatever we think it's important to remember that, a little later in Matthew, Jesus said that he is present in those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, lonely, sick and in prison. Clearly in these uncomfortable words there is an understanding of Christ present in our community right now in those who have need, no matter where we are in the world.

Recognising that the words we use in worship help form our understanding of God would it be helpful to add to our affirmation the line, 'Christ is here!?' So, the affirmation we would then say: 'Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ is here! Christ will come again' Or, if this was too clunky, perhaps, 'Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ is here!'

Christ is present now, in your life and mine; in the midst of a gathering of people, and when we're alone; whenever we are at church, and whenever we are at home; whenever we are awake and whenever we are asleep. Present in each conversation and each meal. Present each time we get in the car to travel, and sit to watch something on TV.

But, not present in a creepy, monitoring, looking only for faults kind of way! Rather, present as a loving companion who yearns for us to flourish, and who shakes their head when we make poor decisions, but never gives up on us. Who grieves when we're wounded, or broken, and who remains with us long after everyone else has gone home... Christ is here!

'If today was your last day, and tomorrow was too late?' has not been an abstract question for Australian journalist Julia Baird for she has had three rounds of significant surgery and treatment for cancer. In her book 'Phosphorescence', she reflects on these experiences and how they have helped clarify for her what is important in life and faith. The intriguing subtitle of the book is 'On awe, wonder, and things that sustain you when the world goes dark...' and not surprisingly friendship and faith are recurring themes.

Baird writes: "The older I have become, the quieter my faith has become. It is a great stretching for silence, a reaching for goodness, a resting in a peace 'that passes all understanding'. A desire to love better in the face of my countless flaws and constant stuff ups. A desire to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly..." and I wonder if will resonate with you, for it certainly resonates with me? "...a great stretching for silence, a reaching for goodness, a resting in a peace 'that passes all understanding'. A desire to love better in the face of my countless flaws and constant stuff ups. A desire to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly..."

Christ is here!

Disturbed and comforted by the thought of Christ being with us right now, please take a deep breath before I close with prayer:

Gracious God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and your love. As we journey through this week, please help us to seek and recognise you in the midst of each day. Through your Spirit help us to see each person as a gift and respond well to the opportunities you give us to be hope bringers and love givers. We ask in the name of the one gives us hope and love, peace and joy, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen