

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 8th January 2023 – Baptism of our Lord

Readings: Isaiah 42:1-9
Acts 10:34-43

Psalm 29
Matthew 3:13-17

One of the very enjoyable things in the slower rhythm of life between Christmas and New Year was the opportunity to watch some movies! One of these was the musical adaptation of Roald Dahl's children's story, 'Matilda', which has great songs by the Australian composer Tim Minchin. The principal character is a young girl called Matilda Wormwood who is not liked by her parents and is incredibly bright.

At school Matilda has a wonderful class teacher called Miss Honey, but that same school is ruled by a tyrannical headmistress called Miss Agatha Trunchbull... who used to be a hammer-throwing champion!

Miss Trunchbull treats everyone around her terribly – both staff and students – and Matilda is not impressed! Refusing to be intimidated Matilda repeatedly disagrees with Miss Trunchbull and challenges her behaviour. Then Matilda discovers that Miss Trunchbull has cheated her much loved teacher, Miss Honey, out of her inheritance and this proves to be a turning point. Using her newly discovered power of telekinesis Matilda exposes Trunchbull for who she is and drives her out of the school forever. It is deeply satisfying when good triumphs over evil; when little defeats big; and when no lives are lost along the way!

However, it is the turning point I would like to focus on as we consider two of the readings set for today. For, until Matilda discovered that Miss Honey had been ripped off by Miss Trunchbull – Matilda had simply endured the behaviour of her headmistress and supported her school friends when they were abused. However, after that revelation Matilda had a clear purpose – Miss Trunchbull had to go!

In today's Gospel reading we hear about Jesus being baptised by John the Baptist and it was quite clearly a turning point in his life. At that stage we think he was about thirty years old and was living a pretty-regular life. Like many he listened to his cousin John and came to be baptised by him and when he came up out of the water something unique thing happened. Verse sixteen in the text affirms: *"At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'*"

Jesus did not then return home and live his life as he'd lived before. If we kept on reading we'd read about Jesus subsequently being led by the Spirit into the wilderness, preaching, healing the sick, and calling disciples... and all this is described in just one chapter! Clearly,

when Jesus was baptised it was a turning point in his life for it gave new direction and purpose... and for this we can all be thankful!

In the early Church there was disagreement about who Jesus had been sent for. Some of the disciples believed that Jesus had been sent by God for the Jewish people only. They thought he was the promised Messiah and that this had nothing to do with those who were not part of the 'chosen people' as Jewish people thought of themselves. Consequently, those disciples thought it important that if people chose to follow Christ they should follow Jewish religious Law with regard to diet and dress.

Into that ongoing debate the disciple, Peter, had an experience that proved to be a turning point in his life, and in the life of the Church. When we read from the beginning of chapter ten we get a clear sense of why Peter said what he did in today's Gospel so I think it'll be helpful for us to touch base with that.

The chapter begins with a Roman soldier called Cornelius having a vision. In this an angel suggested to him that he should send for a man called Peter who was staying in Joppa. So, Cornelius sent three people to Joppa to find Peter and invite him to come and visit. Meanwhile – Peter had a vision in which he was invited three times to eat food that traditionally Jewish people could not eat. Peter then received the invitation of Cornelius to meet with him and responded to it. The two men then talked about the visions they had received and the penny appeared to drop for Peter! It was quite clearly a turning point for him for he is remembered saying, *'I now realise how true it is that **God does not show favoritism, but accepts people from every nation...***'

If we kept on reading we'd find this: *'While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.'* Even on people like you and me!

In many ways this was a key turning point for the early Church which directed the Church away from being a sect within Judaism to being a new faith.

When we look back at our lives we can helpfully recognise turning points 'though we may not always have realised them to be so at the time. Like, when we accepted an invitation to go on a date; when we met someone for the first time and found in them a longed for friend; when we read a particular book; when we were successful, or unsuccessful, in applying for a job; when we became a parent for the first time...

In the same way we can look back at our journeys of faith and potentially recognise turning points and they may include well witnessed public events such as Baptism, Confirmation, and Ordination. But most of our spiritual turning points are known only to us and can

include the way we had a sense of God speaking to us or guiding us through quiet prayer; or, words in a Bible reading; or, through a conversation in which wisdom was offered. In many ways a new year can offer us a turning point and I wonder if you have a sense of this as we begin 2023?

After her turning point the fictional character, Matilda, had a clear sense that she should make the world a better place by causing Miss Trunchbull to do the right thing by Miss Honey, and then leave the school forever! In the real world it is rarely so easy to achieve such justice and instead demands of us a lifelong commitment.

For Jesus there was a lifelong commitment, after his Baptismal turning point, which was expressed through three years of ministry, an unjust death, and then life-giving resurrection. For Peter also there was a life-long commitment, after his house of Cornelius turning point, which led to a broader, clearer vision about the purpose of the Church.

Do you and I currently have a sense of clarity and purpose which gives shape and direction to our lives? Whether we do, or we don't, I invite you to join me in prayerfully considering the following three questions before writing down some responses:

Question 1: Why am I here?

Question 2: Who would God have me love and serve this year?

Question 3: *In God's grace,* How can I do these things as well as I can?

My hope is that God will use these questions to bring blessing in your life and mine! For now, would you please join me in prayer:

Loving God, we give thanks for our lives and for the reminder in today's readings that you guide people. In your grace, we ask you to guide us in the journey of this year; we ask for greater clarity about who we are in your eyes, and what you would have us do in the life of the Church, and in the life of the world. We ask in the name of the one you called 'Beloved', Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.