

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 22nd January 2023

(The readings in bold are the ones to be used for Morning Prayer)

Readings: Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalm 27:1-10

1Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-25

This week most students return to school and Term 1 gets under way. However, on Thursday, there will be a public holiday for Australia Day and teachers and students will have a day off! Many people will become Australian citizens at ceremonies around the country; many Australians will be honoured for their achievements; and many friends will gather around BBQ's!

In 2020 Bidjara elder Keelen Mailman was made a Member of the Order of Australia. Keelen runs a cattle station, north-east of Augathella, called Mt Tabor which is known as Gooranthuntha in the Bidjara language. When Keelan accepted the position at Mount Tabor twenty-five years ago she became the first indigenous woman in Australia to manage a cattle station.

The person who appointed Keelan was the Bidjara elder 'Sugar' Ray Robinson and to this day Keelan is not clear why he asked her to take on the role. She was known as a hard worker but had dropped out of school half-way through Grade 8 to care for her mum, and she had no previous experience of cattle work. In Keelan's words, *"It was him that took that step of believing in me as a single mum, believing that I was capable as a woman to come and do the job... It was that man that shone a light on me, so to speak, and I sort of hope that I have made him proud since then."*

I think there are plenty of reasons why 'Sugar' Ray Robinson would be proud. Mount Tabor is well established and respected in the cattle industry; the sites on the station that are culturally significant to the Bidjara people are protected and known; in 2016 Keelan was voted, by Barnardo's Australia to be both Queensland and Australian Mother of the year; in 2020 was made a member of the Order of Australia; and is currently pioneering work with the youth justice system through programs at Mt Tabor.

In today's Gospel reading we hear about Jesus gathering a leadership team. In many ways the work could not have been more important, so potentially he would have wanted to find the best people available. People who had demonstrated abilities and qualifications to renew a religion or start a new one! The most qualified religious people in the Jewish community were the Scribes and Pharisees, and if Jesus had wanted political sponsorship there was the compromised court of Herod.

However, instead of recruiting from these groups Jesus initially called four fishermen: Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Without doubt they would have been people who knew how to work hard, and who were familiar with the tough disciplines of fishing. The ongoing maintenance of nets, sails, and boat hulls. The ability to read the weather and survive storms. All these things with with the hard yakka of hauling in nets, before gutting and drying fish. *“Follow me and I will make you fish for people!”* Jesus is remembered saying.

In order for those four men to leave their work as fishermen, their families would have had to be supportive. I imagine there would have been many conversations in that community about Jesus and his teaching. For in those days there was no TV, radio, or internet to entertain and inform so people shared news by word of mouth. People may have begun conversations with, ‘This is what I heard him say!’ or, ‘This is what I saw him do!’ or, ‘What do you think he means when he says this?’ and, ‘Could he be the one? Could he be the Messiah we’ve been waiting for?’

In this context we might well imagine Zebedee saying to his sons James and John, ‘Go with him, and see if he is the One! The rest of the family will look after things while you are away.’ Similarly, Andrew and Simon’s families would have had to support each other while they were away. We have a sense of this because three years later Peter went back to being a fisherman after Jesus was crucified.

Jesus said to those first four disciples, *“Follow me!”* and the Gospel suggests that *“...immediately they left their nets and followed him.”* They then accompanied Jesus throughout Galilee while he taught in the synagogues, proclaimed the Good News, and cured sickness and disease.

I wonder how often they doubted whether they could do what Jesus was asking them to do. From the accounts that follow we understand there were times when they got it right, and there were times when they were completely wrong. How reassuring for us then that the first disciples were not super-heroes but regular women and men, like you and me. They understood some things and they failed to understand others... like you and me. At times they were generous and full of faith, and at other times they were jealous, and squabbled... like you and me!

They were not called to be perfect – they were called to be faithful - in the same way that we are not called to be perfect - we are called to faithful.

I really like the opening question asked of all who are being Baptised and Confirmed in the Anglican Church of Australia – “Do you turn to Christ!” The well-known response is, “I turn to Christ!” and in many ways we are called to turn to Christ each day not just on special occasions!

In the Episcopal Church of the United States candidates for Baptism and Confirmation are asked five questions and the response to each question is, 'I will, with God's help.' Those five questions appear to unpack our one questions, 'Do you turn to Christ?' Let me share three of the questions with you and see what you think:

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

I will, with God's help.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbour as yourself?

I will, with God's help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people,
& respect the dignity of every human being?

I will, with God's help.

When it's unpacked like this we might think – I'm not sure I can do all that! In the same way the first disciples must have thought at times, 'I'm not sure I can do all this!' Which is when we can ask the Holy Spirit for strength and wisdom... so, that we are able – to a greater or lesser extent - to do these things.

For Christ shines light in our darkness and love in our loneliness each day, and I don't think it's not enough to say, 'Thank you!' – 'though gratitude is a great start. In ways great and small I think we are each then called to shine light, and share love, and even... invite people into friendship with Christ.

Would you please join me in prayer...

Holy God we give thanks for life and love, and for the call to follow you each day. Through your Spirit may our lives find meaning and purpose in responding to that call, and in your grace may you use our little lives and abilities to bring blessing. We pray in the name of the one who said, 'Come and see!' Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.