

21st SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME YEAR A HOMILY 2020

FOLLOWING OUR LEADER, WHO IS JESUS!

Mt 16.13-20 Is 22.19-23 Rom 11.33-36

Another week with springtime and equinox getting closer as September creeps up on us, and nearly 6 months of pandemic restrictions weighing in on all of us, but perhaps particularly the elderly, who are shut in and limited in movement, even beyond their rooms or homes. It doesn't get any easier, and we need to accept that this relatively short-term pain will be long-term gain for the good of all. One positive aspect, on perhaps a dark note, is the exposure of the fact that care for the more aged, handicapped and unwell members of our society needs to be vastly improved, in many situations.

On a very positive note, many of our students at St Therese's Primary School have participated in a video for our older parishioners and beyond, at home or in homes for the elderly, to wish them well and offer thoughts of friendship and encouragement, and good wishes, from ISO at home, a terrific initiative of David Rulli and the team of dedicated teachers and helpers, with the support of loving parents, who continue to do a great job with the challenges of the moment with on-line education, communication and connection. Have a look for the link on our parish website and weekly bulletin. Year 5's have also prepared very meaningful and reflective poetic reflections on 'Faith', so check that out too! Thanks to all involved there, all around.

And so now, welcome again to our on-line virtual celebration of Eucharist this 21st Weekend of Ordinary Time.

Now let's begin here, with a tangential reference to my very favourite author, Doctor Seuss, writing as Theo Le Sieg (his real name was Theodore Geisel!), has a 1977 book, titled *"Please Try to Remember the First of October"*. *"If you want a green kangaroo, a skateboard TV or a Jeep-a-Fly kite, (or a balloon pool in the sky or a pickle tree in your back yard), just wait till the first of October."* !! Described as an exercise in wish-fulfilment, while introducing young readers to the months of the year, it also reminds us all that we are never always going to get what we want. In fact, the *First of October* never actually comes! But there's nothing wrong with a fertile imagination and fantasy wishes. And also, as old wisdom and experience reminds us, *"Be careful what you wish for"*, anyway!

Certainly, we are hoping and wishing for a lifting of the limitations and masks, necessarily imposed on us at present, but for that to happen, we hope for a significant decrease in the daily number of new infections with coronavirus, as seems to be happening at present. After a recent peak of over 700 in Victoria, we are down to less than 200 in the past few days, so let's keep hoping, but be careful and compliant in the process as well. It's not the end of the world, and things seem to be getting better with our willing co-operation!

Jewel Topsfield is a journalist I've never heard of before (an interesting name, and apparently Melbourne Editor of The Age) but she writes an interesting and most thoughtful piece titled: *"Finding a place for personal grief in a pandemic world."* She reflects on her sadness at losing a sister in January at only 43, and then a close friend in recent days, with her 6 year old commenting on the daily figures: *"Mummy, the coronavirus is going bananas!"*, worrying about reassuring him with words of hope, and wishing to shield him from anxiety. Then there is her own *'disenfranchised grief'* referring to *"an experience of loss that is not recognized by society or the person themselves... how it applies during the pandemic. When the whole world is grieving, it can be difficult to acknowledge individual losses. What right have we to mourn the fact we can't see our parents or swim at the beach or have dinner with the neighbours when people have lost their jobs or are trapped in violent relationships?"* Yes, it's tough at the moment, but as I've suggested previously, we need to focus on what we do have, and what we can do. In fact, funnily enough, coincidentally, Jewel moves on to speak of one of my regular experiences, of walking *"along the*

Maribyrnong River, when the sunrise transforms the gritty inner west into something beautiful” (her words, not mine – not being one for early sunrise, preferring later sunsets!).

At least we can get outside for exercise and fresh air, even if with masks over noses! And then there is the fundamental reality of love of family and the importance of enduring friendships, made along the unpredictable path of life, to work on and maintain, with all the technological means of communication we are fortunate enough to have at our disposal. Jewel concludes with her son playfully and joyfully hopping out of bed, ready for action, with the words: *“I am reminded that for this tiny window of time – perhaps only for the duration of the pandemic – we are the sun around which his planet still orbits (as he says: ‘Mummy, get out of bed. Let’s play!’)”* Let’s make the most of such opportunities, at, and within 5km of home!

Today’s Gospel is a mid-way high point for Matthew, as Jesus turns towards Jerusalem, his ultimate destiny ahead of him, but first the positives, after getting stuck into the religious leaders of the day for their hardness of heart, lack of compassion and hypocrisy. And this is before foretelling his suffering and death, with the crosses along the way, as we could say we are facing in our own small way right now. Peter is commended by Jesus for his insight into his identity and resulting faith, acknowledging Jesus as Messiah, but not quite understanding what that means, not wanting to hear the hard stuff of the demands and uncertainties of discipleship.

Peter is commissioned by Jesus as the **Rock**, by his name, but there’s still a very rocky road or path ahead, and behind, if we think of his sinking into the chaos and darkness of the wind and water when he thinks he can walk on it, and then his later denial of even knowing Jesus, when the heat was on! One commentator suggests Matthew was naming Peter as a compromise candidate for leadership, as James was the Jerusalem leader of the early Christian community there, and Paul was the missionary leader who reached out to the broader scene of the Gentiles. Whatever, Peter’s very human reactions and weaknesses offer hope to us all, as we tread the path of discipleship in rough and ready times. He does come up trumps (although perhaps that’s not the best word to use these days!), so to speak, in the end!

Brendan Byrne SJ once again puts it succinctly and well: ***“The community of disciples is being equipped with authority and structures (pretty loose and flexible back there and then!) that will enable it to function during the time when Jesus is no longer with them in the human form they have known.”*** And so, here we are now, with perhaps too many structures and strictures, in a church always in need of reform and renewal, as Pope Francis keeps reminding us in the changing and challenging times of our lives. Things are never always the same, as we are even more aware of in the present moment!

In conclusion, let’s look at our best and also our difficult moments in the present crisis, and share our experiences and hopes. Jac Radcliffe (from her home office) has suggested that we share and pool our thoughts, for the parish website, to reflect on life in ISO, as it has become, known to communicate with and support each other in these strange and uncertain times, as we keep hoping for the light at the end of the tunnel, ultimately with a vaccine (nowhere near around the corner, however) and more freedom, and room to move as we go forward, following the way of Jesus the best way we can, as people of faith and hope and love!

john hannon

23rd August 2020