

REVELATION AND REST

Mt 11.25-30 Zech 9.9-10 Rom 8.9-13

Welcome again to our virtual celebration of Eucharist, as we continue precautions, whilst the risks of coronavirus are ongoing, no end yet in sight yet, unfortunately, with new outbreaks in Melbourne, including our local region. The contagious nature of this disease is incredible, but a fact, as we are constantly being warned.

And coming “Together in the Spirit” is the theme for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday, some 250 years since 5th July 1770, when Captain Cook’s Endeavour was stranded, for repairs at what is now Cooktown in Far North Queensland, and encountered the local aboriginal natives, whom he later described in very affirming terms, as content with their uncomplicated lives, appearing to be at home and at peace in their environment. Much has gone wrong since!

The discernment group for the 2020 Plenary Council, concurring with the issues now raised by the Black Lives Matter movement, refer to the Uluru Statement from the Heart of 2017, as “a deep cry for healing. Humble listening will bring healing for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people... A new and real engagement, standing together in solidarity, is a merciful and humble way to a new pathway of healing.”

And so, in this Eucharist, we gather virtually in the Lord’s presence as Jesus speaks to us: “Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” But nice words aren’t sufficient. We must be people of action, patience and hope.

All around there is talk of cabin fever from being shut in, and mental health issues arising, as a result of the current situation, where restrictions continue and even expand, depending on where we are living. It is only natural that we feel frustrated and anxious, concerned about our loved ones and ourselves. Patience and perseverance don’t come easily to most of us, especially when this abnormal scenario has gone on for so long. Yet, someone recently reminded me that the so-called Spanish Flu of 1918 went on for some 18 months, and without the modern means of communications and media that we have today! So let’s be thankful for small mercies, and look at the positives here.

We can get weighed down with the burdens of the day, and take our frustrations out on others. Today’s *Age* newspaper had an article titled “*As corona-frustration builds, make an effort to be nice*”, by writer Sue Green, a Kiwi expatriate. She starts by recalling her own mother, a Sunday School teacher and later an ordained community minister, advising her: “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*”, while she herself had a more negative streak, inclined to complain, carp and blame others when things went wrong. On reflection, she realized that far more equilibrium and peace of mind comes from making an effort to appreciate others and not to be on the attack all the time, quoting Canadian ‘kindness researcher’ John-Tyler Binfet, who suggests: “*We feel better when we’re kind to others and the added bonus is that we make others feel better too.*” How true, but it can often be easier to just react with anger, and we’re all worse off and unhappier, and more isolated and anxious. Thinking before venting is not a bad practice for all of us. She concludes by citing the late Glen Campbell’s song titled “*Try a Little Kindness*”. It might sound trite, but it’s true when we think about it and try to practise it, easier said than done. And it is certainly at the heart of Jesus’ teaching.

Jesus’ reassuring words in today’s Gospel are often used as part of the ritual for Anointing of the Sick, as he summons us to himself and offers comfort and rest, easier said than done when we find ourselves

afflicted with illness, pain and the natural ageing process in general, where we just have to face up to reality of mortality and not being what we once were.

Only last week, I was talking to Michael Kelly SJ, a priest friend about my age, who, over the decades, has done much great work with refugees both here in Australia and then based in Thailand, as well as contributing to Church news and international media communications in the Asian region, now in hospital in Newcastle. At very short notice, he had to face the shocking reality of having a leg amputated (*reminiscent of Father John Pierce, well loved pastor and parish priest here at Essendon for 20 years until his early forced retirement in 1969 at 60!*), all of a sudden having to face a daunting and long recovery process, adapting to his disability with determination and faith. We don't know what tomorrow might bring, do we? He texted me today to say: *"Every day I'm a little bit better. But it's a long slow trip."* So we'll keep him in our thoughts and prayers.

And now, after his jarring warnings of hostility and division arising, even in families, as a result of following Jesus, where our crosses are to be faced up to, Matthew now moves to calling for a positive response to the person of Jesus, who reveals in himself a God of love, reassurance, comfort, rest and relief from the burdens of life.

Scripture scholar Donald Senior contrasts here the intransigent and hostile religious leaders with the crowds more open to Jesus and the disciples moving closer to him: *"Even though fearful, hesitant and often baffled, they ultimately show they are capable of understanding the mystery of Jesus' person and the meaning of his mission."* He addresses God as Father with the same intimacy and reverence as in the Lord's Prayer and then speaks of having all things given by this Father, described as a very high Christology (to be a bit theological), emphasising his closeness to and identity with the unseen God he reveals in himself.

The simplicity of Jesus' words is compared to the complexity and multiplicity of the Pharisaic laws and those who lay down the law literally, the yoke an image of, or metaphor for, the burden weighing people down with the details, rather than helping them face up to the challenges of day to day life. As the Jerome Biblical Commentary points out, *"Jesus' teaching is quantitatively easier because shorter and centred on the essential. But in view of the exceeding righteousness demanded (in the Beatitudes)... it is qualitatively more difficult, because the demands of love of God and neighbour are inexhaustible."* What is more, the disciple is to be a lifelong learner of Jesus' teachings (*reminiscent of the old Monash University motto Ancora Imparo - I am still learning, which I often like to quote!*)

And so, in his reference to children, or little ones, Jesus is not calling for us to be simple-minded, but to be open-minded and so think for ourselves, in identifying the essential elements of his message, without worrying too much about the more minor details of the law. He shows the way with gentleness and humility, but also with determination and certainty about his mission, and no illusions about the hard path ahead, for all who follow him. His reassurance is real for those who believe and imitate his model for living life and loving well. On we go!

john hannon

5th July 2020