

19th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME YEAR A HOMILY 2020

FEAR NOT! JESUS ON THE WATER APPROACHES FROM THE GLOOM AND DOOM, OFFERING PEACE AND TRANQUILLITY

Mt 14.22-33

1Kings 19.9-13

Rom 9.1-5

Again we gather, virtually present to each other as we celebrate Eucharist in these strange and uncertain circumstances, we continue Matthew's account of Jesus appearing on the water, and Peter taking the bold leap forward, only to start sinking, something which I think we can all relate to at various times in the ups and downs of our lives. And so in this time of curfew, lockdown, masks and physical distancing, we pray together.

Anxiety and uncertainty, if not fear, has crept into our lives in a big way since the local effects of the pandemic have become apparent and real. Just this week, I have joined families in restricted numbers to celebrate the lives of 4 well-loved grandmothers, all in their 80's, 3 of whom sadly contracted the coronavirus at the end of their lives. Perhaps the most difficult thing for families was saying goodbye without the opportunity to offer the normal physical affection of a kiss and a hug, a warm embrace, in order to naturally express love and appreciation for that person's presence in their lives. One family had not been able to be physically present with their mother and grandmother for 3 weeks before she died, an awful and emotionally painful deprivation, after a long and loving life.

There's much in today's Gospel which relates to our present experience. We want to be calm and at peace, and yet that is not the way we feel, particularly with the unknown future we face in this continuing crisis. Those doing Year 12 or VCE this year are perhaps affected most, in regard to their studies and their future, but it's not the end of the world to continue their studies on-line at home. At least they now know that that's the way things have to be for the immediate future, and we all have to learn new ways of doing things. At least we have the means to do it, and should be appreciative of that.

As I sat, reflecting and preparing my thoughts here, in my comfortable sitting room, with sunshine streaming through the large windows, it was also raining, the blue sky interspersed with dark clouds, typifying Melbourne weather! At Fawkner Memorial Park the other day, there was first sunshine, then rain followed by hailstones!! We never know what's coming next, do we?

The weather features in this weekend's Gospel, as the winds are terrifying the apostles in the boat, and the chaos of the dark waters threatens their lives. (We can safely presume they couldn't swim either, as there was no learn to swim campaign back there!) The symbolism is powerful, in that the wind can be seen to represent the hostile forces of the world, with Jesus' calming the storm "*a parable of the church besieged and offering symbols of a faith that is bold, stepping out into the unknown, yet vulnerable.*" (*Jerome Biblical Commentary*) Those of us who are just a bit older would well remember the good old hymn to Mary, Star of the Sea, with the verse about '*the tempest tossed church*', which could well refer to our contemporary experience too, couldn't it, with the abuse crisis and concern about future vocations, highlighting concerns about the way forward, changes needed and necessary adaptations to the way we do things as Church, the whole People of God. Crises can present opportunities, as we have here, with our virtual celebration, praying, mindful that we are in this together, as a faith community.

Peter's leap of faith soon fades into uncertainty, doubt and fear, as he starts to sink into the water, his initial impulsivity and enthusiasm typical of a disciple who hasn't thought through consequences. Yet Jesus reaches out and offers them all peace of mind and eases their fears, through his calm and reassuring presence, as they finally recognize him coming towards them. And so, fearful and uncertain, but approaching him in faith ourselves, we can find hope and calm in the midst of it all.

Once again, in these trying and anxious times, I believe we need to look at what is truly important. Warwick McFadyen is a senior journalist with The Age, and this week his contribution was titled: "*We've had to redefine what's essential.*" He reflects: "*If I were living in Stage 4 land, I could,*

masked and alone, go to the supermarket. I could then pick up a script from the chemist (pharmacist), proceed to the grocery store for anything miscellaneous, fill up the car at the petrol station... buy a paper (for me from the ether!)... I could mail a letter (not that we do that much these days!)... Lastly, I could go to the bottle shop and buy several bottles of wine. Of course, I would have to do all this before curfew. My retail destinations are all deemed by the state government as essential to existence in a pandemic... What were once the humdrum activities to life are now the necessities – the essentials. As long as you can reach them within 5km of where you live. What we once thought were fundamental elements, such as eating out, going to the pub, exercising at the gym, playing sport or having the hair styled, are not. They are surplus to the requirements of suppressing the spread of coronavirus. They are essential in their not being essential. It's a rationing of movement, and that is essential in these times. Food, water, shelter, security. Social belonging. These things are essential to a person functioning at the most basic level. Once can sing that love is all you need (My favourite Beatles song!), but your body may beg to differ... As an essential service, physiologically, we first need food, water, shelter. Then we can love... It's forced into everyone's homes the social contract called sacrifice for the greater good... At the risk of stating the obvious, everyone feels better alive. That would seem the essential starting point, and endpoint, to life in a pandemic.” Given our current experience here in Melbourne, I quote at some length, because he puts it so well. And he reflect thus, after he tragically lost a son at 21 in 2019, of sudden heart failure, following which he wrote poignantly and powerfully of his deep grief and sense of loss, in *“When my 21 year old's heart simply stopped.”* (You can find it on Google)

I believe Warwick makes a lot of sense, and knows what he's talking about, when the bottom seems to have dropped out of his previously relatively happy world. So, let us be thankful for the precious things we have and can take for granted in normal times: Life, love, family, friends and, for those of Christian faith, recognizing that Jesus continues to walk with us, emerging reassuringly from the darkness and chaos, as he does to Peter, in today's Gospel. It is for us to try to acknowledge this faith dimension and apply it to the way we cope with the necessary restrictions on our lives at present, with a spirit of generosity, reassurance and acceptance.

Mind you, this makes it no easier for those whose employment is in jeopardy or lost, and whose businesses are on the edge, and for those who are suffering the serious illness or loss of loved ones, those working in the front lines of medical care and essential services. anxiety at the heart of it all at present, from which we all suffer, to some degree. It may sound trite, and has been said so often before, we are all in this together but apart, as we keep all in our thoughts and prayers!

We can all feel, like Peter, that we are sinking at times like we are in now, but let's continue to be hopeful and positive about who and what we have, rather than focus on what we cannot, and are forbidden to do, at present! These things will pass, even though we don't know when and need to be patient, that most elusive of virtues and fruits of the Spirit!

john hannon

9th August 2020