

17th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME YEAR A HOMILY 2020
A GREAT MISSIONARY MODE, TREASURE, PEARLS AND A MIXED CATCH
OF FISH

Mt 13.44-52 1Kings 3.5-12 Rom 8.28-30

Welcome once more to our ongoing virtual celebration of Eucharist, as we continue to be patiently persevering, with our mandatory masks ready for outdoor wear, a first for all of us! Despite the limitations of fogging up the glasses, failing to see facial expressions, particularly a smile or two, and the discipline of washing cloth masks every day, and failure of face recognition on iPhone!! Motivation is there, firstly public health and safety for ourselves and others, given the current crisis, and secondly, a \$200 on the spot fine helps us 'be good' too!

"At Easter, we celebrate Christ the light who transforms the darkness. There is a lot of fear and darkness in the world. It is our Christian ambition to shine our light, however small, into the darkness. If only we could imagine what it is like to be 'the other, the world would be transformed and difference would be valued.'" Thus spoke Father Noel Connolly in June 2011, writing as Director of the Australian Columbans (some of whom, as we know, are based locally here in Strathmore). He continues: "Missionaries are not especially virtuous. They have the same fears as everyone else." He then reflected on his early experience as a missionary in Korea, not knowing the language or the people, but losing his fears as he came to know them. He came to realize he was not going to save the world (as he had first hoped!), nor are you and I, but "our job is to rid ourselves of our messianic expectations and to relieve others of such expectations." It is God who saves the world, and we are here to make a difference be contemplative and spiritual." (2013). He also spent 12 years as Vicar to the Columban Superior General in Rome, travelling the world to Columban mission outposts, as a sort of fringe benefit! (He's worth Googling on YouTube)

In a talk he gave to priests when I was working in Broken Bay Diocese, around 2013, I recall him telling the story of the Leunig cartoon in his office, where a man meets God in the person of a wounded man lying on the side of the road. God begs the man: "Help me. I am God, and I am wounded." "You're not God", says the man. "God is all powerful." "I am all vulnerable" says God. "I am in pain. I am at your mercy." It was too unbearable for the man. He became so infuriated he killed God. Yes, it sounds totally shocking, but, it woke us up to listen! It's a statement about Incarnation in the vulnerable, human Jesus revealing an all-loving God to us.

Noel's key point was that "Most of us want God to be powerful because we would like to be powerful, to be in control and not to suffer. We fear the pain, the chaos, the lack of order and loss of certainty if vulnerability is at the heart of life. But now, because of our sins of deed and omission in the area of sexual abuse and the care of victims, we are learning to be a more vulnerable and much less powerful and respected Church. It is also ironic that this may be a better starting point for mission." The opportunity is there for humility, admission of failure, and so, a fresh approach to evangelizing as People of God or Church.

*Noel was a great story teller, and grounded missionary, not an unrealistic idealist, as he learned through his 50+ years of priesthood, ordained in 1969 (a few weeks before the lunar landing!). Sadly, he died in June at 75, after living with cancer for 20 years, which I never knew, deferring retirement to the end, in order to contribute to promoting a new paradigm for the Church in Australia, and preparing for the coming Plenary Council, whenever that might be, with what's going on. He was a man of faith, humour and common sense, committed to building the Kingdom Jesus proclaims throughout the Gospels. I quote from Father Jim Mulroney's tribute in the latest *Far East* Columban journal: "Noel loved the world and loved people. He believed in the blessings from investing in the truth, and, above all, he loved*

God, the trace of whose finger in the arena of human affairs, he spent a lifetime discerning.”

Matthew is also a great story teller, as are all of the evangelists, basing their accounts on the master storyteller, Jesus, whose down to earth illustrations were easily understandable to his audience, without having to resort to details of the law and rubrics of ritual, all of course, having their place. For Jesus, however, the fundamental message was about the heart and heartfelt response to his revelation of a God of love, compassion, mercy and forgiveness, as demonstrated throughout his public ministry, and no doubt, his relatively brief human life in general. His concern was to focus on the essentials of how to live life well as a person of faith, yet acknowledging that we are all full of foibles, with clay feet, as they say.

Over the last month, we have moved from the sower, reflecting diversity and the need to produce the good fruits of the Spirit, to the wheat and weeds, the mustard seed and the yeast, now to the priceless treasure, the pearl of great price and then the big catch with the net, the last a variation on the weeds and the wheat.

Well might we ask why this Kingdom Jesus speaks of is so precious, because it is so elusive in some ways. His extreme language is to wake his listeners up to the fact that the need for active response is now, and not a call to keep out of trouble, procrastinating until we are saved in the end. It is very clear that Jesus accepts the reality of a flawed world, with imperfect disciples at the centre of it all. The difficulty of giving up all is in fact an impossibility, as one can only presume that, in the background, the apostles continued to face up to their responsibilities at home in family life and work, and the rich but not necessarily young man, was asked to give it all away to follow Jesus, and he just couldn't do it. Nor can we, as we need the essentials of life to survive, and more than that, to be effective, in living the Gospel.

The Kingdom is so precious that it is worth making sacrifices for, however, in order to be part of it and to contribute to its ongoing evolution. It is not about power and glory, privilege and position, but inclusion, justice, love and peace. Noel Connolly was a terrific role model in reflecting this spirit and producing the fruits of the Spirit, throughout his well-lived and well-loved life. May he rest in peace, fondly remembered with gratitude.

And so we continue with Matthew's unique account of Jesus' parables of the Kingdom, all about sorting out our priorities, remembering we are not going to save the world, but can make a difference in our own small way, as they say.

john hannon

26th. July 2020