

23rd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME YEAR A HOMILY 2020

PRACTICAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION & FATHERS' DAY

Mt 18.15-20 Ez 33.2-9 Rom 13.8-10

Welcome once more, to our virtual celebration of Eucharist as we patiently await, and hope for, some relief from the current restrictions we continue to observe, apart from some silly, selfish and ignorant individuals, with the benefit of all in mind. The past week has reflected a reasonably consistent decline in numbers, with 76 new infections, more so far for Saturday, so here's hoping.

Also, it's Fathers' Day this weekend, so let's remember and acknowledge with appreciation and love, our fathers, and those who have been father figures to us in different ways, for the contribution they have made to, and their presence in our lives, now and in the past.

This weekend I read an interesting article titled: ***"We get braver as we get older, And what the hell do we have to lose, right?"*** It concludes with a question: *'Where is hope to be found in the face of so much inaction?'*

Who do you think might have said this: *"In California, there are whole communities of not one black person living there and yet young people and old people, white people, are holding out Black Lives Matter signs. That's hope... my tendency is to be a glass-half-empty person – I come from a long line of depressed people– I've worked hard to become a glass half full person. We're living in this incredible time where, between COVID and anti-racism uprisings and the climate crisis, we're at the brink. We could fall off a cliff, as humanity, or we can remake everything the way it is supposed to be. And we just have to let enough people know it's possible."* Yes Jane Fonda at 82, still trying, from her perspective to make the world a better place, and isn't that the role of all of us, in our own way, we called of course, to respond with a faith perspective based on Jesus' teachings?!

Well you might ask, what has Jane Fonda got to do with the Gospel, but I can identify an angle to connect her livewire octogenarian approach, to where we are today, as individuals and as a society, with you and I as active participants, whatever our current limitations due to ongoing Stage 4 somewhat draconian restrictions here in Melbourne, and Victoria as a whole. All for the common good, as we hope for relaxation of at least some of strictures sooner than later.

Any organization needs its structures, rules and regulations, procedures, disciplinary measures for transgressions, and room for a second chance (or even more), where things have got out of hand, given that total exclusion is a rather harsh approach to solving problematic or even offensive behaviour. Human nature, being what it is, leads us into all sorts of temptations, bad or erroneous choices, and proneness to wandering off the track here and there. The institutional Church is not excluded, given that we are all members, and there is no perfection here, nor will there ever be.

Back in 1983, when pursuing studies Canon Law in Ottawa, as well as enjoying cross-country skiing in powder snow outside the front door in winter, learning to ice-skate on the Rideau Canal (longest ice-skating rink in the world!), and meeting and making new friends in parish life at weekends, I recall a moment where one of the doctoral students being quite upset, at the announcement that a whole section of the draft of the new Code of Canon Law was removed at the last moment, and he had just about completed his doctorate on the subject, and all of a sudden, it had disappeared! (He still obtained his doctorate, which was published as what might have been!!)

It was related to today's Gospel, as it concerned establishment of administrative tribunals at the local level in the Church, so that disputes could be resolved by conciliation and negotiation, in a mediation process, rather than a full judicial procedure, or an appeal to Rome. There was apparently a fear that this might compromise the authority of the diocesan bishop for one thing, and to decentralize too much control from the centre of a hierarchical organization, such as the Catholic Church. To my mind, it was an unfortunate and backward step, as part of the Church's social teaching (from the late 19th century) has been to promote subsidiarity, that is, that decisions be made at an appropriate level, with having to go all the way to the top all the time. Pope Francis is certainly moving us more in such a direction!

Today we have Matthew reflecting the reality of life in the early Christian communities, where disputes arose, and in applying the teaching of Jesus, he could see a need for the application of principles of forgiveness, another chance and then recalcitrance being punished by exclusion, either temporary quarantine

(a relevant term for our current experience), or ultimately permanent exclusion by excommunication, if there was not genuine repentance and willingness for reconciliation.

It is perhaps puzzling or even paradoxical, that Matthew then speaks of the accused offender being compared with a tax collector (Matthew having been one himself, in his earlier career!) or a Gentile. Yet, we know that Jesus' pastoral ministry often had him engaged in outreach to such types, in particular. Scripture scholar Raymond Brown has a positive take on this, suggesting: "*We must remember that Matthew's community was a mixed one of Jews and Gentiles, and that Jesus' final instruction was to go out to the Gentiles and teach them... Therefore, the repudiated Christian may still be the subject of outreach and concern.*" And Brendan Byrne SJ reminds us too: "*The goal is not simply to 'win', but to 'win back your brother or sister', that is, to reach an outcome in a way that will enhance everyone's sense of being a respected and valued member of the 'family'!*"

Donald Senior, another learned scripture scholar sums it up thus: "*The community's pastoral concern for the errant member does not completely end, even after the painful step of expulsion has taken place... For Matthew, Jesus' presence in the midst of the community even in moments of discord and painful decisions, becomes the embodiment of the Divine Presence and the guarantee of the community's authority.*"

Rather than accepting any sort of kangaroo court, by spontaneous judgement and expulsion, or purely civil authority, Matthew claims divine authority from Jesus, in proposing a simple 3 stage process, where at first, the transgressor is asked to acknowledge his (or her) wrong, recant and repent. If not, then the second level is to include 2 further witnesses to encourage repentance, and finally, if no resolution is achieved, to have a public hearing before the community, so that discernment can be made of the validity of the accusations. Perhaps, even more than saving the cost and engagement of lawyers, the intention is to resolve issues of contention and disputes between individuals by mutual good will and consensus, in the spirit of the Gospel, rather than involving the secular authority of the state. There is also the necessity of acknowledging that we all have our subjective perspectives on matters, and can all be inclined to tell a different story about the same reality.

At the same time, don't we know that the institutional Church (and other institutions as well) have failed abysmally in not acknowledging or addressing some grave areas of criminal transgressions, and the shocking long-term damage inflicted upon victims, as revealed by the recent Royal Commission into sexual abuse. It is now official policy that allegations of criminal offences be directly reported to the police, and rightly so. With the natural tendency of institutions, whatever their purpose, to protect themselves and keep up appearances, it is so obvious that external accountability and review is necessary, including appropriate punishment, where conviction is concluded. The Church does not have all the means to achieve its own ends as an autonomous body, but must be transparent and accountable too, to the broader society in which it exists and engages.

Today's Gospel doesn't solve all the problems or right all the wrongs, but gives a perspective on how faith communities should operate and try to resolve their differences and relatively minor transgressions in a spirit of love and forgiveness, as demonstrated consistently by Jesus throughout the Gospels, as a divine imperative.

Reform is an ongoing process for you and me and for the Church and society. Our call is to keep in mind Gospel principles in moving forward in faith and a spirit of forgiveness and generous hearts.

And a Happy Fathers' Day to all fathers, grandfathers, great grandfathers, and to those who are and have been father figures in our lives!

john hannon

6th September 2020