

28th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME YEAR A HOMILY 2020
PERSONAL FAITH RESPONSE – A CALL TO ACTION WITH GOOD DEEDS

Mt 22.1-14 Is 25.6-10 Phil 4.12-20

Another week, another homily, another Mass, but still in virtual reality in terms of physical absence from our community of friends here at St Therese's. Here's hoping some of the restrictions might be lifted sooner than later, but patience is the ongoing virtue required, as we just can't forget or ignore the reality of the virulence and contagious nature of this coronavirus, which has insidiously infected our world. Once again, it is great to have you with us, together in spirit.

Our primary students here celebrated a virtual paraliturgy for the Feast of St Therese, as Term 4 began, led by Grade 6's, remembering a faith-filled, holy and good young person, who lived her short life by kind thoughts and good deeds, and I told them a springtime story, fitting in with her nickname as The Little Flower (There's a link in the Parish Bulletin). They'll be actually physically back at school this coming week, with staggered attendance times.

And today, a thought and prayers for my dear old and only aunt (and no uncles or cousins!) Betty, who is unconscious and fading, after a full and long life, blowing out the candle, and able to enjoy the cake and the company, for her 97th birthday only a few weeks ago. She also enjoyed the company and friendly welcome she received here, when staying with me and coming to morning Mass and morning teas and soup senior friendship gatherings over the last 2 years or so, since she went into assisted care, after 80 years in her family home at Glen Iris since 1938!

Well, I guess today's Gospel is somewhat out of sorts or sync, with where we are at the moment, limited to family meals with those who live under the one roof, and ZOOM or WhatsApp or Skype or FaceTime or whatever, enabling us to at least gather socially, as with my regular Sunday evening catchup with some of my priest friends around Melbourne. The only trouble is, we can't share around the cooking! It is at least a means of communication where we can socialize in a novel way, whilst having a meal. I'd imagine it's the same for grandparents seeing their grandchildren, although a virtual meal with coherent verbal exchange might be a bit difficult to control, with the younger ones making a mess, perhaps!

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus associates with all sorts, often getting together for meals in table fellowship, to the chagrin of the religious leaders, particularly when he is so indiscriminate with whom he chooses to associate. A shared meal is a great leveller, where hopefully there is room for dialogue and sharing of thoughts, ideas and experiences for all at the table. For a few instances, Jesus feeds the hungry crowd, sits down with the critical Pharisees and the like, invites himself to the home of Zaccheus, shares the Last Supper with his closest friends, then rejoins them for a fish breakfast at the beach on the shores of Lake Galilee, post-Resurrection. The continuity is there, from earliest times in the church, as his faithful followers gathered together for Eucharist celebrations ongoing, albeit virtual at present. And so, in the strangest of times we have ever experienced in our lives, here we are now, doing this in memory of him, acknowledging in faith his ongoing real presence.

My good friend Frank O'Loughlin, recently retired parish priest of Sandringham, liturgist and Eucharistic theologian, considers the arthouse film *Babette's Feast* (1987), is a classic metaphor for what Eucharist is all about. Hearts are softened, eyes are opened and preconceived prejudices, judgemental attitudes and thoughts converted to enjoyment and a new openness to each other in Jutland, northern Denmark, of severe climes in weather and Christian harshness and austerity, with no sense of *joie de vivre*, until Frenchwoman Babette generously cranks up her feast, in gratitude for the refuge offered to her in the village, to which all are invited, some, with dark thoughts, only coming to see what was going on, perhaps in order to find more material to criticize and condemn the non-conformists for having a good time. (It was all a bit much for my friend Martin Ashe, now PP of Mernda and surrounds, who dozed off early on, in the dour and dark phase of the story, and woke up when all the food and good

wines appeared on the tables, wondering where it all came from!!) The word Eucharist itself connotes gratitude, to a loving God, who nourishes and graces his people who respond and participate in faith.

At face value, today's parable sounds rather harsh, but we need to appreciate the allegorical nature of it, as Jesus' presentation of salvation history and God's gratuitous concern and unlimited love for his people, but countered by their sometimes hostile response to His message, conveyed by the Old Testament prophets, often enough rejected and unjustly and harshly treated, just because they provided a wakeup call to a people who regularly wandered off the track, easily swayed by negative influences to gratify themselves, with little or no thought of consequences.

The catholic view here is that this is a universal call, for all, and that no-one is an island unto oneself. Common sense should tell us that! When the invitation to the wedding feast goes out to the riff-raff of the highways and byways, there are no restrictions at all. (In Luke's Gospel, the first round invited all have excuses not to come, but here it is straight out rejection by the front line characters, concerned only about themselves!)

The message is also that we, the Church, the People of God, are a mixed bag. Whilst there is always the opportunity for forgiveness, there is the enduring responsibility of contributing to the community with good deeds. As Brendan Byrne SJ puts it: "Though the community may have to put up with bad behaviour for a while, there will come a time of judgement when such recalcitrants will be called to reckoning and expulsion from the 'banquet'". There's no excuse for complacency or non-co-operation (except where it concerns the non-violent type a la Ghandi or Martin Luther King!!) It is a choice to be made by each invitee. It's not just a matter of passively being there.

Of some concern is the poor chap without the wedding garment. Taken literally, his expulsion into the darkness (with weeping and gnashing of teeth) seems rather unfair and unreasonable. The commentators interpret this as a result of failure or refusal to understand what was expected of a guest, once the invitation was accepted. It was more than just getting in the door for a free feed, but there is a requirement to actively get into the scene and participate in the festivities by engagement with the others present. It's a communal scene, not just for oneself. It's not that he couldn't afford the wedding garment at short notice, but that the requisite good deeds didn't follow. There are no free tickets, and so Baptism on its own is not a guarantee of salvation, but the ongoing response that ensues.

On 4th October, the Feast of St Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis issued a new encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (using the words of St Francis, calling us 'brothers (including sisters) all'), concerning the current scene in our world, and challenging us to be aware of our responsibilities to face up to the challenges to live as agents of change in working for a better world for all, at a time when there are the dark shadows of injustice and inequality and prejudice in so many parts of the world. (There's a link on the parish website, including for a summary version, for those whose attention span is like mine!)

And while, we're talking about feasts, at the other end of the scale, it is worth noting, too, that the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize has been deservedly awarded to the World Food Program, the world's largest humanitarian organization, focussed on fighting acute hunger, set up to serve the needs of the many starving and deprived, particularly in wartorn parts of the world. In the citation announcing the award, it was said to "not only prevent hunger, but improve prospects for prosperity and peace... by preventing the (appalling) use of hunger as a weapon of armed conflict." The statistics are staggering, with assistance provided to almost 100 million people across 88 countries in 2019, with more than 130 millions suffering from acute hunger... primarily caused by armed conflict! Unbelievable stuff, but this is real, revealing to us all, what is actually going on in a very troubled and troubling world.

So there's plenty here to contemplate here, and determine our own concrete response to living the Gospel in our own reality as faithful disciples of Jesus.

john hannon 11th October 2020