

HOMILY 24th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2021
THE CROSSES OF LIFE ARE REAL, BUT SO ARE THE JOYS

Mk 8.27-35

Is 50.5-9

James 2.14-18

Welcome again to Mass on-line this 24th weekend of Ordinary Time, as once more we await hopefully, but with uncertainty for things to open up before too much longer. Still, the numbers of infections are still climbing in NSW (1599 cases this Saturday, with a rising death toll) and Victoria (450), so please get vaccinated if you haven't been already, as soon as the opportunity arises for you.

Meanwhile, I am happy to note that I am on a double with Melbourne Demons into the AFL Grand Final for the first time in 21 years, and Melbourne Storm knocking off Manly Sea Eagles last night as well in the NRL! But I won't wear the scarves for Mass!! My Max Gawn whiskers' imitation must have helped the Demons, as well as the thematic cap, mask, tie, sox, mascot and pen.

Now, Jesus today even calls Peter '*Satan*', a very different sort of Demon, as a wake up call for Peter and the disciples to accept that one can't avoid or escape the crosses and crises that come up to test us along the path of life.

And so we gather in spirit to pray and reflect in a sombre spirit, on the 20th anniversary of the terrible tragedy and evil of 9/11.

20 years ago today, on 11th September 2001, I vividly recall the unbelievable and unimaginable images on late night television around 11.00pm, thinking I had tuned into a horror movie, only to realize that this was tragedy happening in real time before my eyes. Having been to the lookout above the 110th floor, at the top of the New York World Trade Centre in 1983, with my Mum, it was even more poignant. The advertising brochure for the WTC, which I still have (somewhere in my archives), was ominously, in retrospect, titled: "*The closest to heaven you will ever get on Earth*", or something to that effect. The Twin Towers seemed such an impregnable edifice, but nothing is designed to withstand fully fuelled airliners striking at full speed, as we saw the two towers eventually implode and collapse to the ground. My thought at the time was of the thousands of people losing their lives. There were phone calls of farewell in fear to loved ones from those trapped in the towers, and awful images of people falling.

After a night of troubled and broken sleep, I got up to a phone call from a local nursing home in Asquith, with a request to anoint an elderly dying woman, suffering from dementia. I recall at first thinking: "*What's the point?*", with the shock of what had happened the night before. Then, on reflection, off I went to anoint her, realizing that every individual life counts, and that Jesus' message and actions were consistently based on this principle. (*As I was called to Arcadia nursing home yesterday, for the same reasons.*) On my way, I distinctly remember feeling that the world had changed, for the worse!

Exactly a year before, the 2000 Sydney Olympics were a time of friendly and open welcome to the world, and that spirit was evident everywhere in the city. There was a genuinely vibrant and happy feeling that was palpable (*even though I had a maximum of 25+ guests staying with me in and camping in the backyard of the presbytery, conveniently opposite the Asquith railway station!*) at one point, such that you had to get up early to have a hot shower!!).

Someone said to me just this week, that the world had changed again, with COVID-19, as it has for all of us. No-one could have anticipated or imagined the way in which our lives, movements and travel, have been affected and restricted over the last 18 months. Yet, we know that we have to tread carefully, observing the ongoing limitations on us, for our sake and the sake of others in our interconnected community. It has been difficult for all.

Remember, last week, we had the healing of the deaf mute man, after Jesus had taken him aside and reached out to restore his hearing and speech, and just before today's Gospel, there is a similar scene, where the blind man's sight gradually returns, after his encounter with Jesus.

Now, in contrast to the happy healing accounts, the Gospel today has the strident words of Jesus, directed at Peter, who has just professed his faith in him, but then doesn't want to hear about the hard yards (now metres!)

of facing up to the crosses and hardships of life. There's no freeway or stairway to heaven, whatever the song might say. The path is rocky for all of us and there are no easy bypasses. I often say we certainly don't have to look for the crosses, as they will come to all of us in different ways, like it or not.

Apart from facing up to our own foibles, failures, fallibility, and ultimately, mortality, we are in a complex and defectable, world where things can and will go wrong, and we can't determine or escape it all. At the same time, we can make things better where we have that chance, in helping others to accept their crosses, as we carry our own here and there, and seek help for ourselves where we need it.

James Martin SJ, editor of the Jesuit America magazine, reflected on his work as a chaplain at Ground Zero in the days after 9/11. We might wonder how such hatred and evil can exist, and be perpetrated by human beings on each other, but there it is, and we've seen it before, and, sadly, we'll see it again, in different ways. James writes: ***"In those weeks, I worked at a place of death, a Calvary. But for me, ministering at Ground Zero was about resurrection. Because what I saw was signs of new life: the heroism of the rescue workers searching for survivors, the generosity of volunteers who came from across the country, and, especially, the silent witness of the firefighters and police officers who had given their lives in service for others as they raced into the burning buildings. 'Greater love has no person...'. My mind moves to the paschal mystery... the almost insuperable difficulty that Jesus' disciples had communicating what they had experienced between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. How much Jesus suffered... And they were so frightened that they hid in that dark room afterward... Words are ultimately inadequate to fully communicate profound experiences... We are called to remember. And to share our memories, no matter how incommunicable they are."***

In our lives, we are not likely to experience such horror as the victims of 9/11, or of war in general, but the crosses of life are there to be faced and carried, and the burdens hopefully relieved along the way, with our faith giving us focus, hope, direction and meaning. At the same time, let's remember the joys and happy moments of life are to be treasured, appreciated and shared as well, as we live in faith and hope and love, following the way of Jesus.

john hannon

12th September 2021