

2nd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME YEAR B HOMILY ESSENDON 2021

WHAT IS THIS CALL TO FOLLOW JESUS?

Jn 1.35-42 1Sam 3.3-10,19 1Cor 6.3-20

People talk about a sense of vocation in all sorts of ways. Last week, we celebrated the Baptism of the Lord, in the context of reminding ourselves that Christian baptism is a call to all to make a free will decision to follow the way of Jesus in our daily lives, as individual awareness grows of the responsibility that is part of the deal. Ultimately, no-one else can make that decision for you or me, even though the event of Baptism usually occurs before we can make a personal choice, but the intention is certainly that we grow into it, as we live, love and learn.

In traditional Catholicism, the word *vocation* usually took the mind to a call to priesthood or religious life, and, I would argue, that there was too much deference given to the person who took on that life, as if raised to a higher plane and automatically more holy, hopefully **not holier than thou!** The pedestal mentality was unhelpful to ministry and relationships in general, to my way of thinking. As a priest since 1978, I have always believed that one establishes personal credibility by who one is in word and action, without just expecting deference because of title, uniform or role. That goes for all of us, really. As for respect, that should be a mutual attitude for all.

I would argue that, in many ways, it can be more demanding to making a commitment to being a lifelong partner, perhaps moreso to being a parent, where there is no looking back, and the ties that bind are permanent and irreversible, particularly in regard to parenthood. The associated total demands on time made once a child enters the family scene reflect changes and adjustments required in an intimate loving relationship, and are challenging for all involved. And sometimes it has to be accepted that a lifetime commitment made can become impossible, for whatever reasons, without being judgemental.

In a partnership, there is also the benefit of growing together and improving each other, knocking off the rough edges we all have, through compromise and open dialogue and expression of hopes, fears, feelings, anxieties and joys of life and love, achievements and failures.

Given that, I can acknowledge that the life of a priest can be that of a selfish and perhaps eccentric bachelor, given that I can suit myself to a large degree, in many aspects of life, without the need to compromise or adjust to the needs of another person in daily life. At the same time, a commitment to priestly ministry is a call to service of others on a pastoral and sacramental level, which is why I am here now talking to you, but as one of you, not as one set apart, to talk down and expect privileges.

This leads me to a reflection on someone I mentioned last week in passing, whose comment on being ordained a bishop that the most important day of his life was that of his Baptism, even though he couldn't remember it! That person was Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, who died recently, a bishop who spoke his mind, reforming Tribunal annulment processes with compassion and understanding, and bringing lay people, particularly competent women into the picture as interviewers. He was an auxiliary bishop in Sydney for 15 years or so, before retiring and writing a number of books, whilst continuing his pastoral ministry as a bishop.

He was one of the first bishops to acknowledge the seriousness of the sexual abuse crisis in the church, and was outspoken in his support for victims and critical of the inadequate response of Church leadership as he saw it, long prior to the Royal Commission.

When I was lecturing in Canon Law, and administrator of the Melbourne and later Broken Bay Tribunals, from 1987, he provided me with a good model for involving lay and religious interviewers, beyond the prior heavily clerically based system. He was the first person in Australia to broaden the scope of women being part of the scene, and a female perspective made a common sense addition to the canon law field, particularly when it came to *Marriage, Divorce and Nullity*, or annulment, which was the title of one of Geoff's first books. He was also directly involved in developing procedures for addressing the issue of sexual abuse in *Towards Healing*, where the intention was to encourage victims to come forward and be heard with compassion and

understanding, and for perpetrators to be dealt with, and removed from ministry where the complaint considered credible, and proven, after formal investigation.

Geoff's last book on the subject of the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, was titled *For Christ's Sake*, and was looked upon with askance in some quarters, as he was so directly critical of church leadership in failing to address the issue in the past, particularly in terms of listening to victims, and acknowledging the long term damage and hurt done to them as a result. Simply put, this was something that needed to be stated.

Only a month or so ago, just before he celebrated 60 years as a priest, I was pleased to be able to speak with him to acknowledge his contribution to the life of the Church, and his example to me personally, as to how to apply canon law in a pastoral, and not just juridical, way.

As for the broader and critically important Christian vocation, you may have seen headlines in the last week, whereby Pope Francis has approved official roles for women in the Catholic Church, as readers and Eucharistic ministers. It's good that it is acknowledged, but it also shows that Rome is often far behind in stating the obvious reality of the past and ongoing contribution of women to life in the Church, particularly at the grass roots level of parish life, as we experience here.

And so, we come to today's Gospel, which has John (not Mark, whose year it is) describing the chain reaction effect, once John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the *Lamb of God*, the one who sacrifices himself, to be followed from this point, as Jesus then asks them to come and see where he lives, presumably nowhere too permanent! Funnily enough, there is no identification given to the other disciple with Andrew in the first place, whose brother Simon Peter comes in as number 3 the next day. Was the other one John himself? May well be, but he doesn't say. Peter is immediately given the title *Rock* by Jesus, in anticipation of his future role as leader, despite his many setbacks and failures along the way, which gives us all hope, as we continue the path of discipleship into our future, in another year rolling on.

john hannon

17th January 2021