

HOMILY 16th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2021
GOOD SHEPHERDING

Mk 6.30-34

Jer 23.1-6

Eph 2.13-18

Well, here we are, with a bit of déjà vu all over again, as we pass through another hopefully just 5 day lockdown, in order to contain the current local COVID outbreak. It's all for the common good and health of the community, particularly those health compromised, so that fruit of the Spirit, patience, is called for once more. And again, the reminder is there, of our moral and social responsibility to get vaccinated, as soon as we can, for the good of all.

We can all feel a bit lost and frustrated at times like this, but there's also the opportunity to take some time out to think about our priorities, and how to use our time more effectively, yet slowing down and trying to appreciate the fact that we can still get out for a bit of exercise, to smell the roses and see the birds, appreciating the environment around us, along the way.

Meanwhile, we have this weekend's Gospel reflection on a very familiar theme, that of Jesus as Good Shepherd, an image taken up graphically and in reality by Pope Francis, with that memorable photo of him with a lamb around his shoulders. Yet, as I often say, it's not to be taken too literally that we are just sheep to be led and fed without thinking for ourselves. Life might be less complicated if we just blindly conformed to norms directions from others, but free will is part of the deal, as to who we are as humans and Christians. So the challenge is to use free will well, under the guidance of a well-informed conscience.

Just in the last few weeks, we've had a number of funerals, which gives pause to remind us of the fact of our mortality, the need to make the most of each day, and the fact that we never know what tomorrow might bring. Frank Walsh's story is a good one to start with, in that he was stricken with polio at 6 weeks of age in 1931, was in splints for the 5 years, and unable to walk until he was 7. He more than made up for his initial limitations, determined that he would never be defined by his disability. Not only did he have a highly successful career as a lawyer and then judge, but was a person of faith, empathy and compassion, with love of family and life in general, described as "*deeply religious, strong of ideals and ethics*", and "*a man of compassion, generosity of spirit, good humour and a deep engagement with all those who have shared his journey*". His autobiography is titled *Splints to Silk*. He was obviously a remarkable character, whose faith and determination was extraordinary, and from whom we can learn much.

We also had a farewell service for Noelene McSweeney, married here at St Therese's in 1954, to Kevin, for 66 years. It was recalled how once, on the way to see a live show with *'The Seekers'* she saw a homeless man sleeping on a park bench and wanted to stop and give him some money and a blanket, later upset during the concert, thinking of the poor chap out in the cold. A simple example of her compassion and Christian concern was demonstrated here, as well as being a loving wife, mother, grandmother and great grandmother (known as *Grandie*).

Then there was Fiona Daniher, a person full of enthusiasm and zest for life, a great sense of joie de vivre, who died at only 44, youngest of 11 children Her family and friends gathered here to celebrate her well-lived life, her loving mother Edna present, and who gave out Communion. The quote was used from Abraham Lincoln: "***And in the end, it's not the years in your life that count; it's the life in your years.***" And don't we know of her brother Neale's commitment to raising funds for MND research, the debilitating disease that has afflicted him (and of which my Dad died at 59), another example of not only facing up to adversity, but also doing something about it to help others suffering from it.

Shepherding comes in many ways. It was an Old Testament image or metaphor for leadership and care and concern for others, particularly the most vulnerable. The king was meant to provide support for those in need in the community for which he was responsible. The role was not just about wealth, power and might, and we see Mark presenting Jesus in that role, guiding with compassion and teaching the ways of love, truth and justice to people who were seeking guidance and meaning in their lives.

Earlier in Mark's Gospel, the disciples have gone out in pairs to spread the Good News of the Kingdom, but now they are back with Jesus, for a bit of rest and recreation, but the people keep following for more good

news and nourishment of body, mind and spirit, as the prefiguring of Eucharist comes with Jesus feeding the crowds, with the multiplying of the loaves and the fish.

Says Brendan Byrne SJ: *“We are to sense his desire for rest and recreation being overwhelmed by the stronger force of compassion and a desire to instil new purpose and understanding into the people through teaching. The Church’s pastoral and teaching ministry is simply and extension of this pastoral compassion of Jesus.”*

And, as Claude Mostowik MSC puts it too: *“We are called to be shepherds. We become disciples by doing the work of being a disciple of Jesus; peace-making, love, healing and justice.”* Paul’s vision here is worth a mention, as he reminds us of the need to break down barriers between people, and Jeremiah, that sad, but persistent, old prophet, warning against bad shepherds, whose main concern was themselves and not their scattered flock. For all of us, the Christian call and responsibility is to lead by example with pastoral sensitivity, compassion and care.

john hannon

18th July 2021