

GOOD FRIDAY ESSENDON 2021
SUFFERING SERVANT UP TO DEATH
Jn 18.1-19.42 Is 52.13-53.12 Heb 4.14-16, 5.7-9

Welcome to Good Friday at St Therese's. It's good to be back in action, although still with prescribed restrictions and precautions.

Jesus' promise is his ongoing presence and encouragement to perseverance in adversity, as he faces the Cross as Suffering Servant, of whom we first hear in Isaiah the prophet.

I remember clearly the first Good Friday after my Dad died in early 1982, of undiagnosed MND at the premature age of 59, and Mum came over to St Edmund's Croydon for the afternoon service. It was particularly poignant, as we reflected on grief and loss, and appreciated that life had to go on, unreal as his absence seemed at the time. It was a time of sombre reflection and sadness, but also gratitude for a fundamentally good man who left many good, happy and amusing memories, which helped us to sustain the loss. Meanwhile, his sister, my aunt Betty, lived to celebrate her 97th birthday last year (with the bonus of a video greeting from Geelong Cat Billy Brownless), before she rapidly declined. *Such is life*, said Ned Kelly, (*even if on the gallows!*).

The crosses of our lives are real, and we can't escape them. Nor do we need to go looking for them either. We are not called to be Christian masochists. There is nothing good about suffering or pain, physical or mental, but it's all a natural and necessary part of our life experience. The preciousness of life is to be acknowledged and appreciated, and the joys and sorrows as all part of it, as the irreversible arrow of time inevitably and relentlessly moves on for all of us. We have right to seek happiness and fulfilment in life, but not at the cost of the good or welfare of others, and certainly not in terms of self-satisfaction or gratification for me, me, me, as can be the mentality at times, in the world in which we live.

If we are fortunate enough to live to a good old age, then we still have to face up to the natural process of deterioration, so get used to it! It's not fun or easy to deal with. Yet, it's much tougher and unfair when serious illness or tragedy occurs earlier in life, before one's expected or hoped for time, and when others are dependent on a loved parent or friend, or where there is the traumatic and unthinkable event of losing a child.

Mortality is a part of the deal, but let's not be morbid about it. This life isn't meant to be a veil or valley of tears to be endured. It is a gift to be enjoyed and lived well. For you and me, in the context of the Christian message, an opportunity to love well, and to gain strength from our faith and the way we live it out in action, and deal with the crosses thrown up at us.

Andrew Hamilton SJ (*whose father delivered me as the family GP*) writes of "***The Grounded Hope of Good Friday***", speaking of it as properly belonging "*in that world of outrage at the violation of humanity, It does not move us away from horror and anger but invites a pause for closer reflection on them... a day of solidarity. It sets the lives of all these brave people, dead and living, and the lives of all whose dignity they defended in a wider arc, where the value of a life sacrificed and a freedom vainly fought for is not lost, but shines into the tapestry of relationships between people and world, between past, present and future, a tapestry that will never be unpicked. It is about hope against hope, its face set not against anger but against despair. The arc of the Christian story of Good Friday also reaches beyond remembering and beyond solidarity to a grounded hope. In it, the man who was killed on Good Friday is the Son of God who shared fully our humanity in all its betrayals and abandonment, rose from the dead, victorious over its power, and whose spirit remains with us. Neither for him nor for others who share his fate are death or defeat the last words. The last word belongs to life and to the solidarity that his rising engenders.*" Words of hope and promise!

Rather negative and later mad atheist 19th century philosopher Fred Nietzsche, whose father was a Lutheran minister, thought Jesus missed the point of being human, as he was too soft and gentle, the Beatitudes being for wimps! Yet, we know Jesus was not prone to weakness, in the way he faced his inevitable fate, as he saw it, with courage, strength and determination, and relentlessly moved forward, effectively determining the time of his departure, having completed his earthly ministry.

He then leaves his followers to work it all out from there, but with plenty of clues from his own life in word and action. The Beatitudes or positive attitudes are what he leaves for interpretation and application. I prefer the translation of *happy*, rather than *blessed*, as applying to those who try to live by these principles, as we find ourselves in engagement with, and service of, others, and not in our isolated selves.

And, despite all the darkness, injustice and basic evil and horror of this day, paradoxically titled, ***Good Friday***, let's look at the goodness of those along the way of the Cross, particularly the faithful women who reach out to Jesus, walking with him to the end, at the foot of the Cross, and then later at the tomb. Remember, in Mark's Passion he speaks of "*Some women watching from a distance. Among them was Mary of Magdala, Mary who was mother of James the younger and Joset and Salome. These used to follow him and look after him when he was in Galilee. And there were many other women there who had come to Jerusalem with him.*" So, there they were, faithful to the end and beyond. And Joseph of Arimathea and our old enquiring and truth-seeking Nicodemus, who pops up out of the dark at the end, are also worth a mention in the credits! As for the apostles, particularly Peter, their periodic weakness and failure offer hope for us all.

As we gather to commemorate this solemn and sad day, at the same time, we open our eyes of faith in Jesus' message of peace, love, service, forgiveness and reassuring hope, as the story does not end here. And so, we prepare to celebrate Easter, that he lives.

john hannon

2nd April 2021