

5th SUNDAY OF EASTER ESSENDON 2021
REMAIN IN MY LOVE AND PRODUCE GOOD FRUIT

Jn 15.1-8 AA 9.26-33 1Jn 3.18-24

These last few weeks, there has been some contention over religion and faith in the market place of the secular society in which we live. I see no good reason why faith matters should not be aired and discussed, so long as there is respect for and tolerance of different religious beliefs, traditions and practices in our broader world. So often we see it is not the case, as I mentioned last week, even to the extreme of that filthy phrase, '*ethnic cleansing*', on the basis of colour, ethnicity and religion. Looking at our common DNA and Paul's reminder that, when it comes to Christians, there should be no distinctions, so that such discrimination would be laughable. That is, if it weren't so serious and the consequences so evil and deadly, and directly counter to what is known as *The Golden Rule*, which applies to most of the major religions in some form or other, as "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*"

Jesus, in Christian tradition and teaching takes this a few steps further, in instructing us and demonstrating by example his call to love others, even if they don't love us, and ultimately to love our enemies and to forgive those who have hurt us. I must admit, I don't go as far as the *forgive and forget* idea, which I heard in a Reconciliation liturgy recently, as repression of memory is not healthy, as Sigmund Freud reminds us. And we need to be worldly wise and wary, where wrongs have occurred, and need to be identified and addressed. What is more the virtue of forgiveness is important as a means of getting over resentment and bitterness, which only erodes our own equilibrium and peace of mind.

There is contention now, over a new proposed Australian education curriculum, which is said to reduce the emphasis on our Judeo-Christian heritage and its influence on our society, of which there can be no question of its importance. We need to know our history, but the full picture requires that we appreciate also the indigenous spirituality of our First Nations, and also the diverse religious traditions beyond Christianity, and to find our common ground on this precious planet of now nearly 8 billion human beings. The debate goes on, but I believe we do need to understand something of the beliefs of others, particularly in this multicultural society, where 30% of our population of nearly 26 million were born overseas. So, a balance needs to be found.

The 2016 census tells us that 30% of Australians have no religion, and that's certainly not the 30% born overseas, with Catholics in the majority of 22% in terms of numbers, but not necessarily regular attendance! Look around, and we see the numbers present here now don't represent the sum total of Catholics in this demographically very Catholic area!

I like Baptist minister Tim Costello's approach to expressing and living his faith in the public forum, as former CEO of World Vision Australia, mayor of St Kilda at one stage, lawyer and author. He has certainly put his Christian faith into action through his commitment to social justice and ethics, as well as being an outspoken critic of profit for profit's sake, in particular, the negative consequences of gambling, without consideration of the human factor and the common good. Now a fellow at the Centre of Public Christianity, he quotes the wise and insightful British head Jewish Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who died in 2020, as advocating care for others as key to lived faith, in "*Talking about the need for us – his whole point in morality is that it's not I and it's about others. Morality in Sacks is actually more we than I.*" If we are genuine about our faith, it has to be more than just empathy for those we get along with, but a sense of collective care for others, which should be at the heart of our political discourse as well. Surely, this is what producing the good fruit is all about, from living branches connected to the vine, symbolized in Jesus.

No doubt, a large proportion of the non-religious would have some form of humanistic ethic, which would incorporate the meaning of *The Golden Rule* as well. You don't have to be formally religious to be a good person, but don't we know there is an advantage to having faith which reflects the spiritual dimension of life and gives us direction and meaning, which is why we are here now, appreciating the fact that we can once again gather as friends in a faith community, something which perhaps made us even more aware of its importance.

Today's Gospel takes another of Jesus' images or metaphors, from life experience and the world around him, so that his hearers and now disciples in the early Church, understand the meaning and implications, so that they can identify themselves as followers of Jesus in word and action. This is part of the long Last Supper farewell discourse of Jesus, who has already washed the feet of those present (*Jn 13*), as a call to service, the Eucharistic discourse on the Bread of Life already covered (*Jn 6*), as a ritual to be continued by his followers.

Once again, Brendan Byrne puts it well: *"The commandments that the disciples are urged to keep (and so, you and me), all reduce to the commandment to love the brothers and sisters. Keeping this essential commandment is what is meant by the exhortation, 'Remain in my love'... The fullest sense of the command here is 'come to live, and remain living, within my love... Believers are to realize that they are caught up in the **current** of a divine communion of love. They should **remain** within that current by allowing divine love to flow through them to one another."* As we've already heard, the second reading today, also from John's early church community puts it simply thus: *"Whoever keeps his commandments lives in God and God lives in that person. We know that he lives in us by the Spirit that he has given us."* And so flow the fruits of the Spirit (*Galatians 5.25-26*), which we should know by now, as I like to remind our Confirmation students, and myself too: *love, peace, joy, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, patience, self-control*, with perhaps the last two being the most challenging, as we get older!

And so, in practical terms, you and I are to apply that principle in living and acting out our faith in the Catholic tradition, along with our worship and prayer, as a community of believers and as individuals doing our best to produce the good fruit too, and with a bit of pruning along the way, which can be a painful, but essential process for all of us!

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