

HOMILY 22nd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2021
SOCIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY
DO WE TRY TO PRACTISE WHAT WE PREACH?
Mk 7.1-23 Deut 4.1-8 James 1.17-27

Welcome to another virtual Mass on-line, as we move towards springtime this coming week. It seems to me that despite day-to-day life being slowed down of necessity, time still seems to fly by, as AFL and NRL finals approach, and I am full of hope with Demons ending up on top and Storm as well, so here's hoping from my point of view, anyway, as I wear my Demons mask, specially made for me by my sister Maree, also a Demons supporter, thanks to my childhood influence!!

More importantly, it is Social Justice Sunday, and I recommend you read the 2021 ACBC Statement titled "***Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor***", providing theological foundations to inspire us to care for creation in all its wonder and beauty, as well as responding to the needs of the disadvantaged and excluded in our world. Its basis is in Pope Francis' earlier encyclical ***Laudato si***, concerning our responsibility to respect, preserve and protect this fragile planet and its 7+ billion inhabitants.

Also our hearts, thoughts and prayers go out to the Afghan people, a population of 40 million, facing fear, uncertainty and the darkness of enforced fundamentalism, as we pray for their protection and respect for their rights, especially the women and children, but also the men, of their fractured and frightened society.

And so we gather in spirit to pray and reflect.

A recently published book, COVID-inspired, "***The Handshake: A Gripping History***", by Ella Al-Shamahi (of Yemeni-Syrian heritage), a palaeoanthropologist and stand-up comic on the side, is a most entertaining read. (*Reviewed this weekend by Phillipa McGuinness in The Age Spectrum*). It got me in, as she takes the normal gesture of greeting, perhaps more traditionally male, and examines its meaning and variations in different cultures. We could start with it meaning '*Pleased to meet you*', but its practice has broadened throughout human history as a sign of commitment to friendship, or a deal, as '*we shake on it*', make peace, reconcile, after hostilities or misunderstandings are overcome. She refers to significant public handshakes of recent times, as between Reagan and Gorbachev at the end of the Cold War, Sadat and Begin with Jimmy Carter's hand resting awkwardly on top of theirs, at the signing of the Camp David peace accords, Princess Diana's gloveless handshake of a dying AIDS sufferer in London in 1987. Unwise Boris Johnson, British PM gets a mention with his ill-advised comment: "*I shook hands with everyone you know*", ending up critically ill in hospital with COVID shortly afterwards!! And did you know that chimpanzees fingershake?! The argument is that the good old handshake is the '*gold standard of human connection*'. It's meant to be a symbol that we will follow through in practising what is preached in that gesture of good will and positive intentions.

Nevertheless, things have changed with the need for physical distancing and precautions against spreading the virus, as our primary social responsibility in the present climate, so the handshake has taken a step backwards, at least for the moment. So that's my tenuous link to today's Gospel and accompanying readings!

And so, in these days of COVID-19, we are ever more conscious of the need for hygiene and sanitary practice, because of the risk of transmission of the virus, that even the customary handshake is a doubtful proposition! We have to do customary and spontaneous things differently.

Today's Gospel has Jesus taking on some of the customs and ritual traditions of his time, but not in fact, in relation to hygiene, which is naturally, of concern, and not to be ignored. Conversely, he looks to the heart, and the religious leaders don't like it, as they have got to a point of kidding themselves that they are superior, not just due to their positions of power and influence. Just because they meticulously observe all the details of ancillary laws that have evolved over time, in addition to the fundamental law expressed in the Ten Commandments, and broadly prescribed by Moses in today's First Reading from Deuteronomy some 1400 years earlier, they think they are superior and righteous. Much detail had evolved since then, and perspective had been lost, particularly when it came to the critical distinction between head and heart, law and its spirit,

or true purpose and meaning. Being self-righteous and judgemental of others, however, was their basic problem.

The dietary laws had evolved, probably due to common sense and experience more than anything else, with pork a forbidden food, probably because the meat went off quickly, despite preservation with salt (no refrigeration back there!), and pigs had seemingly dirty habits, perhaps starting with mud and odour! As time moved on, other dietary rules evolved, some for good reasons, others not necessarily so. It helps to know the history.

Those of us who are older or classified as ‘seniors’ (*anyone older than I am, at only 68!*) can remember our own Catholic laws of no meat on Fridays (*perhaps to boost the Medieval fish markets, and fish is good for you too!*), serious fasting during Lent (for those between 18 and 59, I think?), and further back, the midnight fast before Communion. Laws developed as a means of external imposition of self-discipline, but tended to therefore take away a sense of personal space for making one’s own decisions about what priorities should be, as a disciple of Jesus.

As it emerges today, Jesus once again returns to basics, with the emphasis on the internal disposition of a person being at the heart of one’s being, and not just external observance of rules, sometimes made for their own sake, rather than a good purpose. He directly confronts the Pharisees and scribes, accusing them of hypocrisy, keeping up appearances of external observance of the laws, and happy to impose penalties on others, but with hearts not in what they should really be about.

As a current connection, did you know that the Greek word *hypokrites* referred to an actor who hid behind a mask (*not like us at present, for whom it’s a necessity!*), but in the context here, relating to a phony, hiding one’s true identity and failing to practise what was preached. As the Jerome Biblical Commentary puts it, Jesus distinguishes between “*the inner person (religion and morality) and the outer person (ritualism)*”, then cataloguing a list of evil deeds and vices, naturally to be avoided: “*fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride folly.*” So, look out and keep out of trouble!

Even beyond the Ten Commandments, Jesus has laid down the new law, in the spirit of the Beatitudes, with love of God and neighbour, not to forget a healthy love of self, as inextricably and coherently linked. The rest should follow, with an attitude of tolerance, acceptance and forgiveness of others, who may be of different background and customs. The law is not to be an end in itself, but to serve a positive purpose for the common and individual good.

Funnily enough, as one sent to study canon law, the experience broadened my perspective on the place of law in the Church, with the last line of the 1983 Code the fundamental principle, that it is for the ‘*salvation of souls*’ or, as I interpret it, ‘*the good of the People of God*’, that being you and me, and a ‘*fair go*’ for all. When lecturing, my introduction was to present the scriptures, focussing on the Gospels, based on the words and deeds of Jesus, as the primary source for Christian faith and life, with the Code of Canon Law only a secondary authority, to help with regulation of worship, structures and implementation.

The challenge for all of us continues to be to try to close the gap between what we say and what we do, with integrity and consistency as faithful followers of Jesus.

john hannon

29th August 2021