

Pentecost 14B

Readings: 1 Kings 8: 22-30, 41-43, Psalm 84, Ephesians 6:10-20, John 6:56-69

Recovery of Virtue

Introduction

This is the last week of our thinking about stewardship. The point of focus these past weeks has been to attempt to understand with some depth, the challenges that face the modern world, that face our society and that ultimately face the Christian Church. The first challenge to which I referred was that of mass movements of people across the globe – emigration from many countries and immigration to some. This is an ongoing challenge and one that requires wisdom – wisdom that understands that immigration is not just an economic benefit but a transformation that requires intelligent social policy – something that the Church is well situated to provide, as one of the most multicultural organizations in society. The second challenge we referred to was, the rise of fundamentalisms – both religious and secular – as the historical and traditional frameworks and consensus of western society, fade. My point then was that, Christianity should be careful not to become just another fundamentalism with others, in its own attempt at preserving the past; but must, and is quite capable of becoming, a power for reason and compassion, in a changing and volatile world.

Today, I want to turn to a third point in the discussion about the urgency of an engaged Christianity in today's complexity. Yes, we need to be a voice for wisdom in a world of mass movement. Yes, we need to be a voice for reason and compassion in a world of fundamentalisms. But the third aspect is this: **we need to be a voice for virtue, in a world where virtue has been increasingly lost. Virtue must be recovered!**

By way of strategy in persuading you, I have three moments: first we begin with Muriel of "Muriel's Wedding" fame – one of the great Australian movies – screened in 1994. Second, the biblical readings; then finally a turn to reality, to today.

Muriel

This film is often interpreted as mere fun, but behind the laughter there are tears. Muriel is a young girl who struggles for a life with meaning. Her struggle is compounded by poor role-models. Her father is a corrupt local politician, who also bullies his family and wife. Muriel's mother is a kind woman, for whom life is just too much, and who ultimately suicides. Muriel, already a victim of that sort of violence, still dares to look beyond the horizon, but unsurprisingly, she looks in the wrong places: attempting to become popular, getting married and so on. In our clip, to the longing strains of Abba's *Fernando*, we find her talking with her former friend from school, Rhonda, dreaming about becoming someone. She recognises with a certain numbness, that she is no-one. The clip ends with the taxi driver's question, "Where to love"? the answer to which is still any-one's guess. Finally, the story leads to a discovery for Muriel. Rhonda, falls seriously ill. It is in this unpromising and scary situation, that Muriel finds meaning, meaning through virtue. Ultimately, it is in living virtuously as she supports Rhonda, that she discovers a sense of self and

she is able for the first time in her entire life, able to positively answer the question: *What sort of character do I want to be?*

Readings

Now, let's turn to the readings. The Gospel reading from John, is the last segment of the section concerning Jesus as the "bread of life", to which we have listened for the last three weeks. On the face of it, the meaning is quite clear: Jesus is necessary for life, Jesus is fundamental to life. Let's remember that this is a key confession of the Christian community as it squares up against a strong, dominant synagogue. But Christian faith is more than just verbal confession, as crucial as that is. Christian faith is also about life-style, the way we live, Christian faith is about character. Turning to the apostle Paul, this is one of the key questions to which he directs his energy in all his writings: *what sort of person do I wish to become, what sort of character do I want to be?* In our reading from Ephesians, this is the import of Paul's comments. Be aware, he says, that this world is not neutral! Be aware that to live with virtue is a constant challenge, requiring intelligence and perception! Be aware, that living with virtue, is always at risk of being undermined by forces within us and outside of us: hence his comment, *"So put on God's armour now!"*

To live well then has to do with the development of character as Muriel discovers and Paul proclaims.

Turning to Reality

Let's take a turn to reality! It is apparent to most people today, that we are living through a period of dislocation, of breakdown. As people repeatedly say to me *"We have lost our way: there is little sense of togetherness, there is little if any idea of community"*. Undoubtedly the reasons are many and varied: it is not just about silly politicians. As a social observer, I think what we are seeing, is something we have not seen before in the same way: the coalescence of two forms of liberalism that together have replaced the central ethical value of virtue. The first is the idea that we live to ourselves, that "we own ourselves" - that freedom is about freedom *from* coercion, freedom *from* limits upon ourselves or the limits others place upon us. (John Locke) The second is the idea that we are just consumers, not citizens, that the only meaningful considerations are capital, goods and money (Adam Smith) Both together: individualism as libertarianism and free markets without social licence, have no place for virtue, no place for recognition of the inter-dependence and social-embeddedness of our lives, no place for the common good. Moreover, once globalized, there is no escape.

It is in this new, worrying context, the Christian challenge, the most noble of challenges, I think, is the recovery of virtue in a world which has lost it, the recovery of *jeong* - concern for our fellow human beings, for friendship among peoples, for unselfishness and humility. That is our mission!