

Homily – 9th August 2020

So, we enter another period of lockdown because of Covid-19. Our lives have been changed in unexpected ways over the last five months, and there is no end in sight.

What it means for the future of Australia and the world is unclear and doesn't look good. Even nations that initially had success in reducing the impact of the pandemic are facing a second wave. What's happening in Victoria has other states, especially our State of NSW, worried.

I guess we are aware of certain groups within Australia who have been severely impacted by this virus and the consequential response of our government to curtail the spread of Covid-19. The elderly, particularly those in aged care facilities, and those working in hospitals, and those with underlying health problems are particularly susceptible to this disease. Many people, despite the enormous spending by governments, are suffering financially; especially foreign students unable to return home, and ineligible for welfare support.

Our congregation, already facing questions about our finances last year, has now had an even larger hit to our income through the loss of rental income and the cancellation of our garage sales and concert programme. Building relationships with young families in the local community has been made more difficult with the closure of our two playgroups. Meeting with friends, and making pastoral visits, has been shifted to phone calls and video conferencing. No doubt many of us had the disappointment of significant life events not celebrated due to restrictions of numbers allowed to gather. Whether these be funerals, weddings, birthdays, graduations, I am sure that most of us have missed out in some way.

All that is happening raises questions for me, and I imagine for most of us. How to respond to the enormous need around us, both in Australia and in other nations? Last Sunday, Geoff spoke to us of an economics of abundance as opposed to an economics of scarcity. How might we respond in the light of what we heard through last week's gospel story of the feeding of five thousand??

Today's reading from Matthew follows immediately after the feeding of the five thousand. And so, I think it influences how we are to interpret today's story.

Jesus' response to that miracle, a manifestation of the abundance of resources, was to isolate himself from the crowds and from the disciples in order to pray AND he sends the twelve disciples across Lake Galilee to the other side.

Matthew makes the point that Jesus prays until early morning. That's a long time!! No indication of what he prays, but he probably did not have much to say, for earlier in Matthew's gospel Jesus says, "when you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words".

Did Jesus need a break from the crowds and the disciples? Did he need to be certain of who he is, to be assured again of God's love and of his calling? Whatever the need was, do we not have the same need to connect with God, and in the silence become aware of the Spirit within us recognising who we really are as persons created in the image of God and loved by God?

Meanwhile, the disciples are in trouble. Despite the sea-faring experience of the fishermen among them, they are stuck in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, battling against the waves and a strong, opposing wind, making no progress. Jesus is not with them.

Does it feel like that for us, as our numbers decline, and we worry about the future viability of the congregation? Our mission seems to be not much more than keeping the doors open. And even that is not happening as Covid-19 continues to spread.

In Australia, and throughout much of the western world, the institutional church is in decline. Despite opening up to those whom others have rejected on moral ground the Uniting Church is ageing and shrinking faster than most other mainline denominations. If we measure our viability by the numbers attending worship then we are making no progress against an opposing wind. Are there more reliable ways of measuring our viability or measuring our faithfulness? Or should we not be measuring these qualities at all?

Look! Who is that walking towards us, coming over the chaotic waves of our doubts and fears? Is it just another delusion; a mistaken belief; a Pollyanna belief that all will come good in the end?

Or is it time to get out of the boat and try something new? Like Peter did? A bit impetuous some of the others probably thought!! And he was OK for a few seconds. But then he looked at the waves and felt the strong wind of opposition. Overcome by fear, he sank like a stone.

What can we learn from this story? The importance of prayer, deep prayer that can lead us into a silent encounter between our true self and the Spirit of God, the divine presence in every part of creation. This kept Jesus occupied in silent prayer on the mountain for hours while his disciples floundered on the sea.

What can we learn from this story? The importance of living in the present moment, rather than dwelling on past mistakes or hankering for a return to some golden age in the past, or fearful of what might happen in the near future. When Peter saw the waves he feared that in the next few minutes he would drown, he was no longer in the present moment, and it is only in the present moment that we can encounter Christ.

What can we learn from this story? Despite our failures and our weakness, the love of God will never abandon us. So, we do our best as disciples, loving one another, reaching out in whatever way we can to those in need, and most importantly connecting to God through prayer.