

WINTER SOLSTICE – FEAR AND MISSION

Mt 10.26-33 Jer 20.10-13 Rom 5.12-15

Welcome once more to our virtual celebration of Eucharist, back in environmental green of Ordinary Time, in these extraordinary times, now 95 days since the pandemic shutdown in Australia, as we gradually and carefully reopen, although the risks are ongoing and real.

We have been able to resume Baptisms for up to 20 present, although most families seem to want to wait until numbers increase. Now, once 50 are to be permitted to be present for all Masses, as well as funerals, all with physical distancing, as I indicated earlier, we will open the doors of the church, but with strict observance of the limited numbers permitted, and disinfecting precautions after each service.

PLEASE NOTE, THIS HAS NOW CHANGED, AS THERE HAVE BEEN NEW OUTBREAKS OF CORONAVIRUS IN VICTORIA, AND THE RULES HAVE CHANGED YET AGAIN, FOR THE COMMON GOOD. UNTIL AT LEAST FRIDAY JULY 10 2020, THE LIMIT HAS BEEN REDUCED TO ONLY 20. THEREFORE, WE WILL CONTINUE WITH VIRTUAL MASSES ON-LINE FOR WEEKENDS AND WEDNESDAY TO THURSDAY WEEKDAY MASSES.

(Once we open up gradually, it will be essential that you book in for weekend Masses, following instructions on the parish website, and, since our weekday Mass numbers average between 30 to less than 50, I thought it not necessary to make bookings. So please be warned: Don't make a rush for weekday Mass, as only 50 can be admitted, with the doors having to be closed to further attendees. It's just the way it has to be at present, and that's the law!)

With still just over 100 deaths in Australia, compared with 120,000 in the USA, 50,000 in Brazil and 45,000 in Britain, we must remember the unseen, insidious and ubiquitous coronavirus is still creeping around out there, with no vaccine developed!

Who said this and when? ***“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”*** We've probably all heard the statement, but wondered what was meant. It is from FDR's (Franklin Roosevelt) first inaugural address as President in 1933, a significant moment, following the devastation of the Wall St crash and subsequent Great Depression, with massive unemployment, poverty and general human misery and suffering. The so called 'Great War', an abominable human tragedy of unbelievable and epic proportions, was a dark memory, and the catastrophic pandemic Spanish Flu of 1919 was no doubt still present, in the minds of many.

Roosevelt was challenging the American people to not let fear make them catatonic, such that fear would only make things worse if they were frozen into inaction, rather than facing up to the moment and looking forward with hope. He continues as he speaks against: “Nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” People were making a run on the banks to withdraw their money and so causing even more damage to an already depressed economy. The banks were closed for some days and Congress was convoked to look for solutions and ways forward with calm and measured plans for recovery. The construction of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco was but one example, as was the Sydney Harbour Bridge, opened in 1932! Public infrastructure projects financed by government, are but one way of stimulating the economy and employment, and so, human dignity, and financial viability for families and individuals, a social responsibility of government and society.

It seems to me we are in comparable times, with the current pandemic, and forecast recession in our own society. All is not lost, and maybe we have learned a few things about what is important and what is not, in terms of the things that can preoccupy us in normal life and activities, before we were shutdown, with the opportunity to reflect and think about priorities, in our family life, relationships, work and faith.

Fear is not something that we can make go away, as a natural and normal human reaction to danger, uncertainty, the unknown, and our own mortality for that matter. At the same time, we need to use it constructively, rather than hide in a dark corner, hoping for it all to pass. This has been a difficult and testing time for all of us, and continues to be, as things can't go back to the way they were, which is not such a bad thing. We need a shakeup occasionally, and this has been a big one, something like we've never experienced before.

As Jesus addresses the issue of fear for his disciples then, and so for us now today, the reality is that we are all fearful and uncertain at times. I like to go back to "Honest Tom" (rather than Doubting Thomas!) at the Last Supper, who is game enough to express his fears and obviously those of the other apostles present, as Jesus prepares to depart into darkness and death, following his long, long farewell discourse in John's Gospel.

Interestingly, of today's Gospel, the Jerome Biblical Commentary says: "***The ministry of preaching is intrinsically frightening***", then continuing: "*Only faith in a revealing and judging God can overcome that fear!*" It's not always that simple, I find! The conclusion is that God's providential care extends to all of Creation, as Jesus takes the example of the sparrow (not the prettiest of birds!), the cheapest life available for offering in the market, even extending to the image of hairs on the head (for those of you fortunate enough to be endowed in that department! Perhaps I shouldn't have had a trim last week!!)

And of course, going back to the 7th century BC, we can't ignore that poor miserable prophet Jeremiah (also known as the 'weeping prophet'), from the first reading, where he is down on his luck, in a black hole, so to speak, rejected by those around him and feeling fearful, frustrated and lost. (And here it is: Rembrandt's classic painting depicts this well – given to me for my diaconate ordination in November 1977! What was this saying to me?). Yet, he eventually digs himself out and picks himself up, determined to continue his mission of trying to straighten God's lost people out, and to encourage them to turn back to him, aside from all of the alien influences of pantheism around them at that time.

So I conclude with the example of an inspirational man of faith. Recently, on May 20th 2020 former Jesuit Superior General Father Adolfo Nicolas died at 84 in Japan, where he had been a missionary for many years, prior to being elected leader. He composed a powerful prayer, which, to my mind, sums up well the challenge of responding to the Spirit, with all of our limitations: "***Lord Jesus, What weaknesses did you see in us that made you decide to call us, in spite of everything, to collaborate in your mission? We give you thanks for having called us, and we beg you not to forget your promise to be with us to the end of time (as we hear from the finale of Matthew's Gospel). Frequently, we are invaded by the feeling of having worked all night in vain, forgetting, perhaps that you are with us. We ask that you make yourself present in our lives and in our work today, tomorrow and in the future yet to come. Fill with your love these lives of ours, which we put at your service. Take from our hearts the egoism of thinking about what is 'ours', what is 'mine', always excluding, lacking compassion and joy. Enlighten our minds and our hearts and do not forget to make us smile when things do not go as we wished (and how often is that in life?). At the end of the day, of each one of our days, make us feel more united with you and better able to perceive and discover around us greater joy and greater hope. We ask all this from our reality. We are weak and sinful men (I say people!), but we are your friends. Amen.***"

This is the prayer of (I quote current Superior General Arturo Sosa) "a wise, humble and free man, totally and generously given to service, moved by those who suffer in the world, but at the same time, overflowing with hope drawn from his faith in the Risen Lord; an excellent friend, who loved to laugh and make others laugh; a man of the Gospel." It fits well with Jesus' call to us, to respond to the presence and call of the Spirit in our own lives, and to face up to our fears with hope and confidence together, difficult as that may seem to be, especially at times like the present.

And on a bright note, let's remember down here that the days begin to get longer, in terms of light over darkness, after today!