

HOMILY 25th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2021
SERVICE NOT SELF-IMPORTANCE

Mk 9.30-37

Wis 2.12,17-20

James 3.16-4.3

Welcome again to Mass on-line this 25th weekend of Ordinary Time, as we await hopefully, a so called **road map** as a way forward to more freedom, but with ongoing uncertainty for things to open up. Still, the numbers of infections are still climbing in NSW (1331 cases this Saturday, with a rising death toll) and Victoria (535), so make sure you get vaccinated, if you haven't been already.

Meanwhile, I am happy to note that I continue on a double with Melbourne Demons into the AFL Grand Final for the first time in 21 years, and Melbourne Storm going well so far in the NRL! The Max Gawn whiskers (even if slightly grey!) are just to get into the spirit of it all!!

And so, once again, we gather virtually together, to pray together in spirit, as we continue the theme of Seasons of Creation, reminding us to appreciate the wide and wonderful world of which we are part.

During the last few weeks, stories have emerged of individuals claiming to have a conscientious objection to vaccination against the rampaging COVID-19. I find it difficult to understand the mentality, when the issue becomes one of the common good and public health of all in our society and in the many and varied groups to which we belong or connect.

Pope Francis, himself a scientist in his own background (as am I), provides a lead here, in encouraging vaccination, describing it as ***an act of love***, praising the work of researchers and scientists in developing safe and effective vaccines to counter the virus and its rampant spread, particularly with the recent contagious delta variety, which spreads so readily, as we see with the increased State of Victoria figures, even after Lockdown VI, in which we still find ourselves. Quoting Pope Francis: *"Thanks to God's grace and to the work of many, we now have vaccines to protect us from Covid-19... (vaccines) bring hope to end the pandemic, but only if they are available to all and if we collaborate with one another."* In describing vaccination as an *act of love*, he speaks of *"Love for oneself, love for our families and friends, and love for all peoples. Love is also social and political... (built up through) small individual gestures capable of transforming and improving societies... small gestures for a better future... No matter how small, love is always grand."* Francis has this capacity to express a message in simple, clear, direct and encouraging terms.

Unless there is a serious medical reason for not being vaccinated, I see it as a moral responsibility for our individual health and common good to do so. There are quite a few stories from the USA and elsewhere, where anti-vax individuals who have contracted the virus, some having died and others seriously ill, have expressed deep regret at rejecting vaccination, now recommending it as the right thing to do. Admittedly, there are still others, who remain deniers till their deaths. But, if we talk about and believe in an ethic of life as a seamless garment, then how can it be right or sensible to be a danger to ourselves and to others, when there is a clear way of radically reducing the risk?

Well may you ask, what does this have to do with today's Gospel, and I see the link as very clear. Jesus is warning his followers about the rocky and difficult path into the future, with a further reminder that the crosses of life are real, in a second prediction of his suffering and death, but which is not to be the end of his story, as we reflect on the reality of his presence in our lives and our world today.

His is not a popular message when it comes to the hard stuff, although allied with the good news stories of hope and healing, in body, mind and spirit. It's just that his followers, just like you and me, don't like hearing about the difficulties of faithful discipleship.

In fact, I think we can see the lockdowns in which we find ourselves can be taken as part of the crosses of life, but with an end in sight, if we all try to do the right things, hard as that may be. And there's no denying the frustration, anxiety, uncertainty and pressures all around on the way we can't have the freedom to do the things we wish to do, in all aspects of our lives, from family to education to employment and business, to travel and holidays. It is weighing us all down, but for very good reasons. We've never experienced a pandemic before in our lives, and we have to adapt and try to cope accordingly.

What to do? Well, last week I wrote to Year 12 VCE students at our 3 Catholic secondary schools in the area, and then to Grade 6 students here at our parish primary school, wishing them well, congratulating them on their adaptability, and encouraging them to develop their life-skills, from the challenging experience they're going through with teachers and families. On Friday I visited St Therese's School to wish teachers and staff well for the term break, and to express appreciation for their conscientious service and commitment. At least, it's something positive I can do as pastor, in the midst of all the limitations. And I did also send out a hopefully positive reflection to all through school and parish communities through the regular newsletters.

The letter of James today, is very practical, speaking of wisdom being demonstrated in the life of a person seeking and also working for peace and understanding, with the realization that human nature can get in the way, with misunderstanding, arguments and wrangling, starting within oneself. His challenge is for us to overcome the darker impulses and to seek what is good and wise. Selfishness and unbridled ambition can overcome the fundamental need to do good and seek mutual understanding, accepting differences without conflict, with kindness, consideration and compassion. These are qualities at the heart of the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus, and where he shows the way all the way in word and deed.

Even so, we now have the apostles arguing behind his back about who is the most important, and so, who will get the best positions in the Kingdom they still don't understand beyond an earthly reward in terms of power, comfort, wealth and freedom from Roman Rule. They just don't get it yet, and so aim to seek favours from Jesus, rather than appreciating that his is a call to service in reflecting these qualities of which James speaks, to bring about a better world.

We hear often enough the words about Jesus and the children (which I always use at Baptisms), much as we see his encounters with women, both groups insignificant in the eyes of Jewish law of the time, their welfare being altogether tied up with the responsible male in the family. Mark demonstrates here how Jesus breaks down the barriers and identifies children as important, as he reaches out to welcome them. He is not advocating naivety or simple-mindedness, but rather the openness, innocence, and yet helplessness of a child, without acknowledgement and love. Guidance by example and encouragement could be taken for granted as part of that recognition.

The call to service and not mastery and oppression is clear here. Jesus shows *en route* that his presence is to be enduring and endearing in the way we treat others, particularly those who are in need. Service by me and you is at the heart of it all.

As scripture scholar, Frank Moloney SDB, says: "***The disciple must always be open, without hard-headedness and hard-heartedness.***" And I conclude with the late Cardinal Carlo Martini of Milan's observation: "***The beauty that will save the world is the love that shares the pain.***"

john hannon

19th September 2021