

2021 25B: Living the counter-cultural wisdom of the Gospel

Readings: Wisdom 2:12-20; James 3:16-4:3; Mark 9:30-37

*Bishop Homily on 19<sup>th</sup> Sep 21*

Dear friends,

On Friday, I attended a virtual regional symposium on climate justice in anticipation of the UN Summit in Glasgow known as COP26. In a couple of months, countries that signed up to the Paris agreement will be asked to ramp up their plans for carbon reduction. Australia, unfortunately, has set no emissions target while our Pacific neighbours continue to bear the brunt of climate change, even to the point of being annihilated.

Pope Francis speaks of the culture of globalised indifference. Australians and Catholic Australians in particular can choose to be part of this culture or we can choose to be on the side of the most vulnerable. We can choose to listen and respond to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor around us.

The Word of God today challenges us to live in a way that is different to the way everyone else is culturally conditioned to live. It is about choosing the road less travelled; it is about the courage to create a community of hope, justice and long-term sustainability as opposed to a self-centred, profit-driven and trickled-down modus operandi.

The first reading gives us a reflection on how to live with integrity and righteousness in the midst of adversity. The true believer or the virtuous man does not live by the conventional wisdom that sees success and power as the ultimate proof of a life of faith. In spite of opposition, he entrusts himself to God. He endures unjust judgement and condemnation for the sake of justice.

This mature reflection on suffering is a deeper strand within Bible. In fact, it departs from the usual theology of reward and punishment that we find in many places in the Old Testament. Instead of saying, health and wealth are the rewards of faith, the book of Wisdom takes us to a higher level of spiritual maturity. We are told to pursue integrity and righteousness even when we are cornered without a way out. Powerlessness rather than power, defeat rather than victory, shame rather than honour, poverty rather than prosperity are the ultimate price we pay for a life of authentic faith. After all, this is the way of the Suffering Servant. This reflection is an indictment of the Gospel of prosperity that is still rampant in many churches across all Christian denominations.

The Gospel tells us the story of how Jesus gives his disciples a sobering lesson on authentic discipleship. This is the second time he brings them down to earth after a high adrenaline event. The first time he spoke about his death was after the feeding of the multitudes. Then it was Peter who did not get it. He earned a sharp rebuke by Jesus for trying to talk him out of the cross.

This second time, after the Transfiguration, they were all excited about the prospects that lied ahead in Jerusalem. They still did not get it when Jesus spoke to them about his own arrest and crucifixion. They were hopelessly set in their worldly mentality. Jesus had to use a child in order to drive home to them a crucial lesson.

"Anyone who welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me." This is a graphic and powerful message about vulnerability and powerlessness. The way of the empire is all about conquest, subjugation and control. The way of Jesus' kingdom flies in the face of ambition, upward mobility, power and glory. In effect, he teaches us that Christian discipleship is about the willingness to suffer with others, to be vulnerable with the vulnerable, to be last with the least, to be powerless with those without power.

Dear friends,

The real test of authentic faith lies in our ability to embrace and to live the alternative consciousness of the Gospel or the counter-cultural wisdom of God. If we are on the side of the vulnerable, if we fight for their share of the earth's resources, if we learn to suffer with them, then we are on the way.

Guided by the kingdom vision of Jesus and open to a world of change, the Church can live up to its prophetic call to be a beacon hope for humanity. We can be an alternative relational paradigm for those on the margins, where the poor and the forgotten can be brought into a new unity; a Church that advocates life at all costs and promotes peaceful life in a war-torn and violent world; a Church that models justice in an age of greed, consumerism, and power; a Church centered on the risen Christ, empowering a consciousness of the whole.

May the example of St Mary McKillop inspire us to embody the kingdom vision of Jesus and become a lighthouse for the world. In the words of Pope Francis, if we want a different world, we must become a different people. May our effort to change the trajectory of the ecological crisis and align the future of our planet to God's intention be brought to fruition.