

Homily for 2nd Sunday of Advent 2017

We are looking forward to the joy of Christmas this second Sunday of Advent. We are also anticipating the release of the final report from the Royal Commission into Institutional Child abuse next week. We can probably expect that in the popular media this will confirm the Catholic Church as an institution which has lost any value for society and any credibility for moral leadership. This along with the passing of legislation legalising same sex marriage reinforce in the eyes of many the irrelevancy of organised religion in Australia particularly the Catholic Church. And, if we take much social media seriously, as a consequence one of the most reviled groups of people are Catholic priests.

The damage done by the abuse to children and vulnerable adults by members of the clergy and the failure of church leadership is real enough. But even as we admit that tragedy we need also to recognise that the Catholic Church is so very much more than that evil. The reality of the Church is extraordinarily rich and deeper than that dreadful situation might imply. The Church has made and enormous and continuing contribution to Australian society. The value of what you Catholics do each day goes largely unnoticed.

At such a time as this we welcome the words of Isaiah spoken to Jerusalem but also to us: "Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call to her that her time of service is ended, that her sin is atoned for, that she has received from the hand of the Lord double punishment for all her crimes." We all carry in some way the burden of the sins of the Church. Therefore now is the time to prepare a way for the Lord.

Advent is a reassuring time because we are reminded every year that with the Lord, 'a day' can mean a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day, as we hear from 2 Peter. In other words both today's evil and today's goodness do not exhaust God's patience nor extinguish God's plan. Nor should it ours. We and all creation have a long way to go. We and creation await the coming redemption and our completion in God's kingdom. We do not lose hope.

Furthermore, we and all creation have a mission to fulfil. We do not wait in idleness. Far from it. We were commissioned by Christ. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). That is still the mission of the Church.

John the Baptist like us was only too aware of the need for his nation to repent. He was certainly speaking to a people who shared a common faith unlike contemporary Australia. So he speaks of judgement for sin. But as he admitted he could only call people to repentance and baptise with water. The one who is to come will baptise with the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit is more than a spirit of judgement but one of salvation. God has the power to change us. So the fire of judgement becomes the purifying fire of the love of God which is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

This then, as Mark's Gospel has it, is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is no accident that he uses the same phrase as the first verse of the Book of Genesis, "In the beginning." Jesus Christ is a new beginning, a new creation taking place. It is always new in every age. And each age and each person brings their achievements and their pain to the mission of God.

Even as we look forward with hope to Christmas joy many of us carry within us the deep loss of loved ones and the tenuous and fragile nature of many of our relationships. We also have some bonds between us that are so strong but are also fraught with frustration and struggle. We sometimes wonder if we can continue. And we are afraid of further loss. But we also carry within us the wonder and love that those very same people have given us over the years. This time of year puts before us the hope that someone who is more powerful than we are will continue to baptise us with the Holy Spirit to bring about something completely new in us and our world.

Fr Graham Gatehouse