

Homily for 6th Sunday of Ordinary Time 2018

When my mother was three years old in 1923 her father suffered a workplace accident. He was an engineer on a coastal steamer out of Brisbane. The injury cause some brain damage. Medicine in those days could do little for him. So he was placed with those whose situation could not be dealt with or understood. In those days it was the Goodna Hospital for the Insane in Wacol. My grandmother and her seven children would travel by train to Wacol each weekend to visit him. He died there. I never met him and know little of his story. It would be good to know how he saw himself or if he was able to share his story at all. But as a child before I knew anything of him the name “Goodna” was synonymous with horror and mystery, a place to be avoided.

Separation and isolation are the ways we still deal with things we don't know what to do with, things we are afraid of. But give a person a tag and you immediately know what to do. Describe a person as insane then you know where to put him. So it is with all who are different. It may be indigenous put onto mission, refugees into detention, and in the case of the Gospel, lepers banished into camps out side the towns. All done for quite reasonable intentions.

Ironically, Jesus who cures a leper by touching him, becomes himself an outsider not able to go into the towns openly. To touch a leper was to become unclean oneself and unable to be part of and participate in community and religious events. And indeed, that was the direction Jesus' whole life was taking. It climaxed in his execution outside the city walls on Golgotha. Again and again he befriended the outsider, the outcast, the sick and insane. He walked through those boundaries and barriers we set up as a protection as though they did not exist. He walked through them just as he walked through the boundary between life and death in the upper room after his resurrection. In himself Jesus reconciles heaven and earth. But today, just like then, we continue to crucify the outsider.

It seems that we do need to be free of so many boundaries we regard as sacred or taboo. The person in an asylum or the accident victim lying in hospital, the elderly dying in a nursing home, or the bereft partner of a marriage that has been broken can see life differently from everyone else. They are on the outside of the normal state of affairs. Of course, they can become quite bitter if they are not aware. And you could “rage against the dying of the night” (Dylan Thomas). But they can also discover that poverty of spirit that inherits the Kingdom of God. When you have nothing, and all seems taken from you, when your life seems devoid of a future, you may come to realise that you do not and cannot know everything let alone the mystery of God. You can live with the humility of Jesus on the cross accepting that mystery of life. Suffering of any kind brings a wisdom that we do not seem to find any other way unless given by grace.

In the silence of deep loss of any kind we are beyond words. We don't just passively accept our fate. We see the world differently. We are embracing the silence of God. There we can be more open to the Spirit within who knows us. Prayer is the way into that place for all of us. Not with so many words but in the silence that does not pretend to know the answer but puts its trust in God. Just like Jesus on the cross.

May I say something about Fr Ezy from Maroochydore. His situation has made a great headline. I do not know the details of what he did and I don't really want to know. Like all such misadventures by priest or politician it reminds us of the old adage, there but for the grace of God go I. On another level it makes one ask questions about celibacy as the Royal Commission has done. As a life given, for the sake of the Kingdom of God, celibacy has been of great value to the Church. In many religions, in one way or another, celibacy has been a way of emphasising the critical importance, as we Catholics would say, of seeking God's Kingdom first of all. That spirituality does not change. But we have to ask questions in view of the crisis of child abuse by clergy. Has the church law of compulsory celibacy for ordination to Priesthood as currently practised become morally untenable? In they eyes of most people beyond the Church, and many within, it certainly has. I leave that question with you for your prayers for the parishioners of Maroochydore and Fr Ezy this weekend.
Fr Graham