

Homily for the Feast of the Birth of John the Baptist 2018

Considered by many one of the best contemporary Australian novelists, Tim Winton is a great story teller. He captures the resilience of people in extreme circumstances. His latest novel, "The Shepherd's Hut", is such a story. It tells of a teenager whose life seems to have nothing going for it. And it seems every decision, made out of fear and suspicion, goes pear shaped and gets him into deeper trouble. It is a story of individual struggle which has only a glimmer of hope, yet it is there. I think also of the people who are victims of circumstances of violence and sickness hunger beyond their control. We are left with the unasked and unanswered question: what does any one life mean?

Have you ever seen someone knit a jumper? Some gifted people are able to create knitwear from the least likely remnants of wool. Wool of all colours, all lengths, and any quality can be fashioned into a sought after garment. Last weekend I spoke of our little stories and God's great story. Our stories are little not because they matter little but because compared to God's kingdom we are very small. As people of faith we trust that God does have that great story and we are a bit like threads of yarn weaved into that great garment.

This Feast of John the Baptist's birth is firmly immersed in that large story told by God. Like the prophet Isaiah as we heard, John too was called before he was born and was given a mission. His words were to be like a sharpened arrow. At every moment in John's life God was at hand, just like Jesus himself. John and Jesus have almost parallel lives in Luke's Gospel. Both born in extraordinary circumstances and both died a martyrs death. John is an unlikely character. He was not born into poverty. His father had an important position in the Temple of Jerusalem. Yet John did not follow his father. Instead he seems to have rejected the religion of the Temple and chose to go into the wilderness and call Israel to a renewal of faith that comes from the heart. As his father Zechariah said rejoicing at John's birth:

"And you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the daybreak from on high will visit us to shine on those who sit in darkness and death's shadow, to guide our feet into the path of peace" (Luke 1:76-79).

God creates the great story out of all the myriad lives of each of us. As we heard in the Psalm God is pretty handy with knitting needles. Just like the yarn in a woollen jumper of many shapes and colours. Our lives are all different. Some are long some short. Some have frayed ends. Some are soiled by life. Yet somehow, God is able to knit a seamless garment out of all creation. And all because God loves us. We can refuse to let that happen and remain a lonely thread on the floor.

That is all very nice I suppose. But as you know many in our post-modern world have decided that there can be no "great story" at all. There is no such "meta-narrative" as it is called, that makes sense of the universe. A story implies a storyteller. If there is no story then there is no storyteller. No God at all. There are only our individual stories. We just make of our lives what we will and live with the consequences. Society becomes a struggle to find ways to live with all that difference and ensuing conflict. The great story of faith told in the Bible and lived by John the Baptist is our story. It is revealed in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, born into poverty, executed as a criminal, yet is raised from the dead, Christ and Lord. Jesus lived, not from suspicion and fear, but from a life lived generously in love for others. That makes all the difference. That love is the key to what any one life means?

The teenager in Tim Winton's novel encounters a strange old priest apparently living in exile. He is a bit like John the Baptist. In that encounter both are bound by suspicion and fear. But in it an enlargement of spirit takes root. The priest, for me, seems symbolic of the loss of that great story by our modern world. The story of faith has been exiled from the centre of human life. If that is the case it means we are born by chance and cast adrift in a universe which has no future.

We are most blessed because we have come to know the surpassing value of Jesus Christ who calls us out of darkness into his own wonderful light. In that light we find a place for every event in life. Not only the good times but also the suffering, pain and death which are part of each of us. We do not look in vain for a pill to cure it all. We simply follow the one John the Baptist pointed to, that is, Christ. It is the risen Christ at God's right hand who calls us into a larger life than we can imagine.

Fr Graham