

Homily for the 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2018

Once upon a time, when I was in Year 6, my parents decided it would be good for me to learn a musical instrument. I was 12 or 13 years old. As I had a toy clarinet previously they bought a real one for me at Christmas. They arranged music lessons for me. So each Thursday after school I would walk down to the railway station with my little case and catch a train at about five pm. In those days few people were going into Brisbane at that hour. I was often alone in the carriage. Most were going home the other way from work. After the 25 minute journey I alighted at Central Station. Then I would walk up the hill to Wickham Tce. to the place where the music lesson was to be held. My father had shown me the way. The lessons were painful. I was the youngest one of six in the class. The teacher did not seem to engage with me at all. But I persevered not wanting to let my parents down.

After the 30 minute lesson, much relieved, I would walk back down the hill to the station. It could be getting dark by then especially during winter. So I went as quickly as I could anxious in the encroaching darkness. In those days Central was a dim, smokey place. There were pools of light along the platform. For a small boy it was enchanting as well and I felt safe. And it had one really bright spot. There was a kiosk on Platform 4 where my train was due. I had 20 minutes to wait. This kiosk had a wonderful thing. It had a soda fountain. I don't know if they exist any more. But for threepence I would buy a large sarsaparilla in a big thick glass. Then I would sit on the platform to wait as I drank. I watched as workers amble in going home late. And I watched the trains coming and going leaving trails of steam and smoke.

Eventually my train arrived and I returned the glass to the kiosk and found a seat. Going home was a delight. In those days you could open the window. I enjoyed the cool air of the evening along with some smoke and soot in the eyes. Sometimes, a drunk got on. It was a bit scary as he stumbled up the aisle breathing foul breath. I held my breath lest he sit next to me! On one occasion he did. I was terrified, trapped in my seat. I sat frozen wondering what he might do. Perhaps vomit over me! Fortunately, nothing drastic happened and I literally ran from the train when I got to my station. From there I walked home to my normal childhood life safe with the family.

I tell this story not as an exercise in nostalgia. Though it is that. Nor as a kind of coming of age story as I entered an uncertain adult world for the first time on my own. And it was that, too. Rather, as I remember the events, I could describe it in terms of the Gospel today as a "mustard seed" experience. All the people I encountered, all the experiences that remain vivid in my memory, had a place in my life. It seemed that there was more going on in the world than I could put my finger on. Something hidden yet as clear as day in the individual journeys I was part of. I was alone, yet I belonged to all I saw and felt. Call it a spiritual experience if you like. I would now call it a sacramental sense that was awakening in me. Not that I could have understood it in those words then. It was the world into which Christ came and embraced. It was as though something good was growing that embraced all of the world. It was something that welcomed all kinds of people and things and experiences like the mustard tree providing a home for all kinds of birds.

Our reading from the Prophet Ezechiel tells another tree story. The passage we read is the last of three tree parables in Chapter 17 of Ezechiel. The first two speak of two eagles. One eagle represents the king of Babylon. The other the king of Egypt. The super powers of their age. The king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, had taken the elite of Judah captive and taken them back to his kingdom where they entered in to a peaceful arrangement with the king keeping their own faith. The parable tells this in terms of the eagle which picks off the top twigs of a cedar tree and transplanted them in fertile soil. The second parable tells of another eagle coming to this transplanted tree offering a better deal. This tree then breaks its promise to Nebuchadnezzar and gives allegiance to Egypt. The Prophet sees this as a failure of trust in God as Judah wavered in its commitment to the covenant and so are doomed. That kind of political manoeuvring is no different today as we see countries seeking favours of the super powers of our day.

The third story we read today tells of God's initiative in view of Judah's failure. God takes a cutting from a tall cedar in Babylon and plants it on top of Israel's highest mountain, where it becomes a sign for all the nations and represent the Messiah who would come from the first tree, king David.

Then as now with the eyes of faith we can see the hidden workings of God in our world be it in the journeys of a young boy or the political machinations of great powers. In our age with its seductive technology it is critical that we learn to see. Even though we love to tell our own little stories as I have done life is not about me. Or to use the words of JRR Tolkien of "Lord of the Rings" fame with his Catholic imagination said to his son, we are "inside a very great story." The Eucharist helps us to see ourselves in that great story. Fr Graham