

Homily Notes for Sundays in Lent 2024
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These Homily Notes for the Sundays in Lent 2024 offer some minimal commentary on the readings and a few suggestions for preaching that take up the themes suggested by the 150th Anniversary Committee of the Diocese.

First Sunday of Lent Year B (Readings: Genesis 9:8-15; I Peter 3:18-22; Gospel-Mark 1:12-15)

An Opportunity for "Covenant" Renewal

In Lent this year we begin our preparations for the acknowledgement of 150 years of the Ballarat diocese. This may be an opportunity to draw on the analogy of special birthdays or anniversaries that have functioned as moments for us to look back on what has been, as moments to look forward to what might be in the future and as occasions to renew the commitments we have made in the past.

We might note that anniversaries in a faith context are times of "covenant" renewal. The time leading up to any anniversary is a time of re-membling. And so, as we prepare to recognise the 150 years, it is fitting that we allow ourselves to "be led by the Spirit into the wilderness". In other words, it is fitting that we take time out to ponder the legacy we have received from our forebears in faith, to give thanks for the commitment of our ancestors, to acknowledge the failures of some among us and to search out ways of living more faithfully in the spirit of today's gospel. Like Jesus of Nazareth, we can be tested by forces that are not of God. Unlike Jesus, and like the people of Israel in the wilderness, we sometimes fail the test. We are invited to give thanks for the "angels" who minister to us in testing times and lead us to embrace God's way of being in the world.

We might ask what it means, in these times of global conflict and climate disaster, to proclaim that God's time is now and that God's reign is near? We might ask how we can be "be joyful in hope, patient in affliction" (Romans 12:12) when we see suffering every way we turn? We can certainly be "faithful in prayer" that together we might think again, expand our horizons or "repent" and truly believe in a gospel way of life. It may be worth noting that the imperative "repent" means literally "think again". It is about changing our mindset, about opening our minds and our hearts to what we are called to now and in the future.

Second Sunday of Lent Year B (Readings: Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18; Romans 8:31-34; Gospel-Mark 9:2-10)

Listen to God's voice.

In both the first reading and the gospel, mountain tops feature powerfully as places of encounter with the transcendent. Evoking a personal experience or asking the congregation to recall a powerful mountain top experience might function as a transformative experience for all. This may also be an opportunity to draw attention to the unique mountain formations

in our diocese, to praise God for the wonders of creation that give life in this part of the planet and to commit ourselves to caring for the environment that nurtures the life of all species. The Genesis story of Abraham's experience of listening to the God of Israel on the mountaintop brought the people of Israel to the crucial realisation that child sacrifice was no longer acceptable. Some mention of the tragedy of children being "sacrificed" in current global conflicts may be appropriate.

The Markan "transfiguration" story has served through the ages to foreground the centrality of the command **to listen** to the One who incarnates the divine in our common home, the one who teaches us how to be human. In the language of the Bible (both Hebrew and Greek), the word to listen is the same as the word to hear or to pay attention. We discover later in Mark's gospel that listening to or hearing the commandment to love both God and neighbour is the "greatest commandment", a commandment that shows us how to be truly human.

The Lenten call to "repent" in the present context may have to do with listening to and learning from the wisdom of our indigenous peoples on caring for the land. If we are open to expanding our horizons, we may be drawn to respect and adopt the ancient names they gave to wondrous mountain formations such as Gariwerd.

An extract from John O'Donohue's blessing, "For Suffering" may provide an appropriate conclusion to today's homily. Link:

<https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/top/advancement/general/fy14/files/For%20Suffering%20blessing.pdf>

Third Sunday of Lent Year B (Readings: Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:22-25; John 2:13-25)

An Alternative Wisdom

Lent invites us to examine our core values and our way of life, to open our eyes to the pain caused by our collective inattention to the wisdom of the gospel and to seek forgiveness for our complicity in any exercise of "power over" others. You may wish to draw attention to current media reports of the exercise of "power over". The Exodus reading presents ten "words" that address key aspects of early Israel's way of life, all of them addressing potential or actual imbalance of power. As with us, the people of Israel sometimes failed to honour the God who delivered them from enslavement which is and was the ultimate experience of "power over". It may be appropriate to reflect on the wisdom as well as the limits of the decalogue for our times*. Israel's law code was intended to protect God's people. It provided an alternative wisdom in its time. It was revisited and interpreted anew in the light of new realities. It came to be interpreted more broadly and more inclusively through the centuries. It is important not to reject the old out of hand, but rather to seek out the wisdom at the heart of the ancient law code.

Paul's message to the people of Corinth is also about an alternative wisdom. Some of the Corinthians placed a higher value on philosophical speculation than on the implications of accepting an executed criminal as their messiah. Paul is scathing in his criticism of these would-be sophisticates and their exercise of intellectual "power over". He challenges their

view of wisdom. The gospel reading foreshadows the death of Jesus by execution, an exercise in human “power over” that does not have the last word: it is God’s power that ultimately prevails. As a devout Jew, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem at Passover. He acts decisively to draw attention to the true purpose of God’s “house”: while there is commercial activity associated with temple worship, the temple is not a marketplace. The disciples understand only partially. The Jews’ request for a sign provides the Johannine Jesus with the opportunity for a play on the word “temple”. The temple is his body which will be destroyed and raised up. ‘The Jews’ misunderstand. [It is important to note that the designation “the Jews” refers to those who reject Jesus as messiah, not to the whole people of Judea or all the Jewish people]. The narrator provides an explanation and indicates that the disciples will eventually understand and come to belief. We travel the journey to Jerusalem among those who understand only partially. We are called to remain open to a deeper wisdom in the light of resurrection faith so that we might come to a new understanding of what it means to live in harmony with one another and with all of creation.

**Footnote on the Decalogue: Worship of one God was a novel idea in the ancient world. Israel’s God cannot be manipulated by magical incantations-this too was a new wisdom. A day to remember the God who liberates was a welcome change for slaves whose way of life permitted no rest. Honouring one’s parents involved taking on their values as worshippers of the one God. Some aspects of God’s ten ‘words’ are situation bound: the prohibition on killing was originally restricted to killing other Israelites; adultery concerned sexual relations with the wife of another Israelite; to steal was to kidnap another male Israelite; to give false witness was to tell lies in a court of law and thus be responsible for the death of another; to covet what belonged to another was to plot and scheme to get it-and wives were then the property of their husbands.]*

Fourth Sunday of Lent Year B (Readings: 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23; Ephesians 2:4-10; John 3:14-21)

Ensuring that our deeds are “in God”

This week we are invited to focus on those in our communities who have been shunned and excluded. It may be appropriate to focus on what happens to anyone who is left out or excluded, the emotions that surface and have the potential, if left to fester, to turn into an unhealthy state of being. You may have a story of someone who has reached out to the excluded and thus restored their sense of belonging, a story to inspire members of the community to turn away from the darkness of ostracising others, even unintentionally, and turn to the light of inclusion and the embrace of a loving God.

The theme of God’s mercy and compassion, God’s inclusive embrace in the face of human sinfulness, permeates the readings. In Chronicles, a foreign king is presented as God’s agent in punishing the infidelity of the Israelites and another foreign monarch becomes God’s instrument in enabling them to return to their ancestral home where they can once more worship their God. While we might not accept the interventionist God of this reading, we may detect here a reminder that God works through all people and not only through those who

share our faith. The reading from Ephesians presents God as rich in mercy and forgiveness, restoring life to those who are metaphorically “dead” through their sinfulness. We might explore some of the ways in which the Synod on Synodality is addressing the dysfunction in our Church and consider the implications for our diocese at this time.

The gospel speaks of God’s love for the world in giving his unique Son in order that all who believe may have “eternal life” in the here and now. That the world “might be saved” is the reason for the incarnation. “Eternal life” is the Johannine equivalent of what the Synoptic gospels call the reign of God or the reign of the heavens. Doing what is true, ensuring that our deeds or actions are “in God”, is the path to the life that is promised, the path to salvation. It is never too late to reach out to those who have been shunned or excluded, to listen to their pain and to offer them a place in our hearts and in our communities and to respect their feelings if they no longer wish to walk with us. We must trust that they are in God and God is in them as they deal in their own ways with the hurts they have suffered.

Fifth Sunday of Lent Year B (Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrew 5:7-9; John 12:20-33)

Good News for all Creation

Unseasonal and devastating floods and fires have finally convinced most people that our planetary home is at risk. This Sunday may provide an opportunity to draw attention to the teaching of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* and more recently in *Laudate Deum*. The human community, especially the developed world, needs God’s forgiveness for creating the conditions that have led to this disastrous state of affairs. The prophet Jeremiah presents the God of Israel as a God who forgives and is even prepared to forget the sins of the past. The people will be God's garden and the seed planted within them is God's Law. They will be God's own billboard and God’s law of forgiveness and mercy will be written in their hearts.

The reading from Hebrew confronts us with the humanity of Jesus who, in the face of suffering and death, prayed “aloud and in silent tears to the one who had power to save him”. These words recall the gospel accounts of Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane. The strange anomaly is that Jesus' agonised prayer was “heard” and yet he was not spared the pain of a violent death. Suffering was the means through which Jesus learnt to obey and to become the source of salvation for all who in their turn learn to obey.

In the gospel reading, among those who go up to Jerusalem to worship at the feast of Passover are some “Greeks”. For Jesus, the arrival of these God-fearing Greeks signals his “hour” of glorification. The Johannine Jesus uses a potent agricultural image to capture the transformative nature of his imminent death: like the grain of wheat, he must go into the earth and die in order to bear fruit. The same is true for his followers: to be concerned only with self-preservation is to “lose” one's life; to give one's life in the service of others is to “keep it for eternal life”. In John's gospel, Jesus' death is also his being lifted up in glory and the moment of his death becomes the moment of drawing “all” to himself. The “all” embraces all people. It also allows for an all-embracing interpretation: in his death and exaltation, Jesus

gathers the whole of creation to himself and into the mystery of God's transforming love. Jesus' hour of death and glorification is indeed good news for all creation.

Passion (Palm) Sunday Year B (Readings: Mark 11:1-10; Isaiah 50:4-7; Philippians 2:6-11; Mark 14:1-15:47)

To be Agents of Loving Service

Mark's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is more restrained and less victorious in tone than the other gospel accounts. In keeping with Mark's gospel as a whole, it forms part of the relentless journey of Jesus, the suffering Messiah, towards Jerusalem, the place of his death. The longed-for liberation will come about in Jerusalem, through powerlessness, suffering and death rather than through might and power.

The following prayer, based on the first reading from Isaiah 50:4-7, might be worth sharing in this context: *'Give me, O God, a disciple's tongue; give me words that I may know how to reply to the wearied; wake me each morning to hear, to listen like a disciple; open my ears to hear; teach me not to turn away but to rely on your help in the face of injury or insult. I know I shall not be shamed.'* In the second reading, Paul offers deep insight into the humanity of Jesus "who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited". Jesus' life of love and service in the face of evil provides a powerful example of what it means to live in the love and the mercy of God. If we wish to live out in our lives the pattern of Jesus' life, then we must "humble" ourselves and confront the forces that are not of God with the same courage and consistency as he did, all "to the glory of God".

At this time of political dysfunction, of global conflict and of growing economic division in our world, it may be helpful to focus on the decisive role of the "outsiders" who feature in Mark's passion narrative as agents of love and service and ultimately as agents of change: the unnamed woman who pours out healing ointment on the head of Jesus; Simon, a foreign passer-by, who carries the cross beam to the place of execution; the Galilean women disciples who remain faithful to the end and who will deliver the news of the resurrection to the male disciples; the ordinary Roman soldier who proclaims that Jesus is "of God". We too can be agents of love and service in this troubled world if the "glory of God" is our goal.