

Homily Notes for Lent 2024

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These notes are not intended for use as a homily. They are prepared as a set of different ideas that may help to trigger thoughts of your own. They do try to connect the Sunday Gospels to both the Season of Lent, and to the approaching 150th Jubilee of the diocese happening at the end of Lent. JMCK.

Lent - First Sunday

Today's Gospel passage gives us two brief cameos introducing us to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The first comments rather cryptically on Jesus' forty days in the wilderness.

Mark's treatment of Jesus' time there in the 'wilderness' may be a classic example of apocalyptic language and imagery — a literary form quite common in the Jewish world at the time.

The Spirit who had just descended on [or into] Jesus immediately after his baptism by John now rather vigorously drove Jesus out into the 'wilderness', an ambivalent location populated by both "wild beasts" and "angels". In apocalyptic language, wild beasts often referred to secular, dangerous, power structures. Angels were the messengers of God at work in the world. Jesus' death would be decreed by the Roman Governor of Judaea, in collusion with the Roman puppet king of Galilee, Herod Antipas, at the instigation of the Jewish chief priests. They succeeded in killing him, but their apparent success resulted in their utter failure — Satan and the angels both at work!

Interestingly, both Moses and Elijah were said to have spent "forty days" either before or after their direct encounters with God on the mountain of Sinai/Horeb. At his baptism by John immediately beforehand, Jesus had just seen the Spirit descend on himself in the way a dove does, and heard the "voice" of God the Father assuring him that he was truly God's "beloved Son". Coming to terms with the mystery of God needs time and silence for reflection — even by Jesus. Can Lent perform a similar purpose for us? And as the diocese celebrates around this time its foundation 150 years ago, do we do well to devote time and silence before discerning together directions for the future?

Mark's second cameo succinctly introduced Jesus' launching of his public life. The trigger for his move was Herod imprisoning John and thereby effectively silencing him. Jesus felt free to move into Galilee. Mark wrote: "There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come' he said 'and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News'".

Jesus saw his message as 'News'. Something was stirring; something was about to happen. More than just 'News', it was "Good News". Things were about to happen. The Kingdom of God would be essentially an on-going event, more than a static teaching.

Jesus' language was naturally reflective of his time when the familiar forms of social organisation were in fact kingdoms. But God was no more male than female; and organised societies were authoritarian rather than democratic. Scholars debate what descriptive term other than "kingdom" Jesus might have used today were he to take flesh in our modern world with its growing sensitivity to female dignity and to personal freedoms.

If we today are facing "a change of era", Jesus was introducing something greater still — an interpenetration of human and divine that both the Church and the world are still trying to come to terms with. Jesus insisted that people would need to change/repent, to let go of how they had looked at life until then and to adjust their behaviour accordingly. Jesus continues to ask of people today what he asked of those Galileans then — in his words, that we "repent and believe the Good News".

To 'repent', as envisaged by Jesus, entails much, much more, than moral adjustment. Likewise, to 'believe the Good news' conveys a strong element of trust, and not just in the message, but particularly in Jesus, its messenger. Repenting and believing involve an on-going, personal relationship that requires dedication and sustained nurturing.

If people these days wrestle with the relentless attrition of former parishioners from the Church, I wonder if it may be partly due to the fact that many Catholics had not developed a truly close and personal relationship with Jesus. How we can fill that vacuum will be a challenge for those of us who remain — but what better time to listen together for God's inspiration and enlightenment than now in this season of Lent and of our 150th birthday as a local Church?

Can we find ways to make St Mark's excitement contagious? In the meantime, can we as individuals do our bit to attune ourselves more lovingly to the voice of our God?

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Lent - Second Sunday

In many parishes of the diocese most parishioners still attending Sunday Masses belong to the senior ranks. The approach of the Diocesan Jubilee will probably stir memories. Perhaps inevitably, many of them will look back with "rose-coloured glasses", remembering nostalgically, and somewhat selectively, what they might call "the good old days" as things used to be. But events of more recent years have countered any feelings of comfort they might otherwise have felt. The sexual abuse revelations of the Royal Commission have left many shocked, uncertain, humiliated and angry. The steady attrition of numbers attending Sunday Masses, including even members of their families, has sown feelings of disappointment, discouragement, bewilderment and sneaking feelings of guilt [What did we do wrong?] Many of our parishioners are quietly suffering.

Today's Gospel passage dealing with the Transfiguration of Jesus provides an opportunity to place our present situation within a wider and, I hope, enlightening and liberating context.

Today's story of Jesus' Transfiguration makes sense when it is pondered from within its context in Mark's Gospel. Just a few days before it happened, Jesus had asked the disciples about the various conclusions as to his identity circulating among the people generally. He had then confronted them directly with the question: "Who do you say I am?" Peter was the first to answer: "You are the Christ" — a loyal and hope-filled response on Peter's part that was surprisingly met by Jesus with unexpected coolness. Jesus immediately warned Peter and the other disciples with him to say nothing to anyone about what had just transpired; and forthwith informed them that in fact he would eventually face rejection by the Jewish leaders who would ultimately have him killed. He then cryptically added that within three days of his being killed he would "rise".

It is interesting to note the spontaneous reaction of Peter: he immediately went into denial, and took it upon himself to dissuade Jesus. Instantly Jesus turned and accused Peter of acting as Satan and having no sense of the ways of God. Jesus then gathered the disciples and any of the crowd in earshot and warned them that, if they wished to be his disciples, they, too, would have to be prepared similarly to take up their cross and follow him.

This is the background to Jesus' Transfiguration.

A week later, Jesus took the three core disciples, Peter, James and John, with him to the top of an unidentified "high mountain". There, away from the crowd, he was personally "transfigured". Mark gave no detail of the transfigured Jesus, but commented that his clothes became "dazzlingly white" — they, too, shared in the mystery of Jesus. The disciples saw two figures, identified by Mark as Moses and Elijah, in conversation with Jesus. Not surprisingly, the three disciples were transfixed by fear. Just then a "mysterious" cloud covered them, and a voice spoke to them from the cloud: "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him."

The voice from the cloud confirmed two of the points Jesus had made earlier. Firstly: "This is my Son, the Beloved". Jesus was indeed the Beloved Son of God though he would be humiliated and rejected by the Jewish leadership and brutally killed: and, secondly: "Listen to him": Disciples were to take seriously what Jesus had said about their readiness to encounter rejection and suffer a similar fate. The warning was not just for Jesus' immediate disciples but for disciples down the centuries.

What was the point of Jesus' transfiguration? Obviously it clearly illustrated that there was more to Jesus than met the eye. There is a whole other unseen and unseeable dimension to his reality, and indeed to all reality — the God-

dimension, the level of mystery, in which even his material clothing, and figures of other ages [exemplified by Moses and Elijah] somehow shared. Yet Jesus warned the disciples to “tell no one what they had seen until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” Resurrection can be understood only in the context of Jesus’ prior crucifixion. We are too inclined, otherwise, to connect human success and greatness with God and the things of God. Likewise we also need the Gospel stories of Jesus’ post-resurrection encounters with the guilty disciples to see the total absence of retribution of any kind on the part of Jesus. There is no violence, no ‘triumphing over’, no punishment in the heart of Jesus, or of his Father. Despite human expectations, the risen Jesus would rise as the crucified [still bearing his wounds], forgiving, totally non-vindictive revelation of the mystery of God.

What sense do we make of all this, in the context of our experience as community of disciples in the diocese of Ballarat, now? Jesus perhaps is warning us not to be surprised by, even to expect, criticism and failure. We need to cultivate the capacity to search for and to believe the mystery-dimension of all reality and the hidden presence there of God.

St Paul gave wonderful personal witness to this: “I was given a thorn in the flesh... I have pleaded with the Lord for it to leave me, but he has said, ‘My grace is enough for you: my power is at its best in weakness’... And that is why I am quite content with .. insults, hardships, persecutions, and the agonies I go through for Christ’s sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong” [2Cor.12.7-10]. These can be hard lessons to learn and embrace!

Perhaps our Lenten fasting can celebrate in symbol that “small indeed is beautiful” — and that success can be dangerous. Can we hear the voice of God proclaiming over the lifeless crucified Christ: “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.”? We need to develop hearts that feel at home in paradox.

Lent – Third Sunday

The Lectionary shares nineteen of the Sunday Gospels of Year B [the Year of Mark] with the Gospel of John — more than one in three. Mark and John treated their subject matter noticeably differently. Mark focussed on Jesus’ activities; John sought to develop their meaning. John’s Gospel was written twenty or more years after Mark’s. In those twenty years the Gospels of Matthew and Luke had also appeared. Between those three, Matthew, Mark and Luke, the deeds and teachings of Jesus had been well covered.

John’s concern was to lead his readers further to explore and contemplate the deeper meanings of Jesus’ actions — to become alert to what they revealed of the mystery of Jesus and of his identity, and thereby to help their faith to become more alive and life-giving. His Gospel was like a collection of “retreat talks”, based on a selection of events taken from Jesus’ public life.

His typical way of doing this was to follow an outline of a chosen event with a longer “dialogue” or “monologue”, constructed to develop a particular theme. The “dialogue” often started by Jesus making an enigmatic statement, that was then misunderstood by his hearers, giving the Gospel’s author the opportunity to draw out the deeper truth of Jesus’ message in more detail. The “development” of each theme was the fruit of the hours of prayer and contemplation by the Johannine community with the risen Christ over the forty or fifty years since his death. Essentially, the Jesus who “speaks” in John’s Gospel is the risen Christ.

The theme of today’s Gospel passage was the incident when Jesus “cleared” the Jerusalem Temple of the animals being sold there, destined to be slaughtered by the Temple Levites and sacrificed to God by the Priests to celebrate the Jewish Feast of Passover. The message that John then examined was Jesus’ concern that God was forgotten in the process and that his “Father’s House” was being “turned into a market”. God was being dishonoured, rather than honoured. Feeling angry, Jesus took it into his own hands to take action, but non-violently. [Not having a Kelpie!] he fashioned a make-shift whip to get the animals moving and they probably did the rest: knocking over the money-changers tables, and other mayhem. By excluding all the animals needed for sacrifice, Jesus was symbolically closing down the whole Temple-based sacrificial system.

This set up an argumentative dialogue between Jesus on the one hand and “the Jews” [in this case, the Jewish senior priests] on the other. In the course of the interaction, the Gospel had Jesus state that, after [and due to] his resurrection, Jesus’ risen Body had become the “Sanctuary” through which God now communed with his People. This comment made more sense to the readers of John’s Gospel written towards the end of the First Century, twenty or thirty years after the thorough wrecking of the Jewish Temple in the year 70 AD when the armies of the Roman Empire had utterly destroyed Jerusalem.

As we celebrate this year the 150th Jubilee of the establishment of diocese as such, the uncertain future “look” of the diocese confronts us. A number of smaller faith communities have already disappeared; others are facing the likelihood. The problem is often aggravated by the distances separating communities. Do we continue to have a regular Sunday Mass? Do we still gather regularly as a faith community to celebrate the Liturgy of the Word, perhaps even receiving Communion with hosts consecrated at a previous Mass?

Questions not unlike these also had probably to be faced long before the diocese ever became a separate diocese in its own right.

Today’s Gospel is not without relevance. Jesus referred there to his risen body as the “sanctuary” where all can make contact with God, whether as individuals or as the “two or three” gathered in his Name. The Second Vatican Council, drawing on the writings of the early “Church Fathers”, spoke of Jesus being present in various ways and through different mediums, particularly, though not exclusively, when the Faithful gather for Eucharist — (i) simply through their own prayerful presence there together, (ii) through the person of the ordained priest, (iii) through the Liturgy of the Word, and (iv) through Communion. The more alert the faithful are to these “presences” when they assemble for their usual Sunday Eucharist, the more appreciative they can become of the value of Jesus’ presence when the priest is not present personally and the Eucharistic sacrifice cannot be celebrated.

Lent - Fourth Sunday

Again this Sunday we are dealing with the Gospel of John. After an enigmatic reference to Jesus being “lifted up” [referring perhaps to his crucifixion, and/or his transition from death to risen life, and/or even to his ascension to ‘heaven’], today’s passage introduced the very positive observation that “everyone who believes” has “eternal life”. That, in turn, was followed by one of the most re-assuring verses in the whole scriptural repertoire: “God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved.” ... this “world” of people, so bent on violently destroying each other and themselves, so riddled with mutual distrust and hostility, whether between individuals or as groups, nations etc.. It implied on God’s part love and forgiveness that were universal, changeless, totally gratuitous, unconditional... God loves, simply because God is love [1John 4.8] (and can be nothing else).

And yet, this beautiful assurance was balanced by human freedom — and consequently the possibility of human “refusal to believe”, which is duly respected by God. Human refusal leads to condemnation. Yet the word “condemnation” is not defined, nor is the concept “refusal to believe”.

The author of the Gospel liked to play at times with opposites in order to emphasise a point: light/darkness, save/condemn, life/death, good/evil, love/hate, clean/unclean... Yet our experience is that we seem to be fluctuating mixtures of the opposites — neither saints nor sinners.

In this situation, we may find St John’s comment about our knowledge of God, and of ourselves in relation to God, helpful: “We are already the children of God, but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed; all we know is, that when it is revealed we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is” [1John 3.2]. St John’s insight seems to be confirmed by St Paul: “Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror; but then we shall be seeing face to face. The knowledge that I have now is imperfect; but then I shall know as fully as I am known”. In the meantime, according to St Paul, “...there are three things that last: faith, hope and love..” [1Cor 13.12-13].

It may be helpful to apply the save/condemn dynamic to life on this side of the grave. Failure to love and to respect each other plays itself out in this life. The alternative is hostility and violence. We have only to listen to the Nightly News to see such aggression and inhumanity working themselves out in the theatres of war that darken our world. The use of contrary and greater violence seems to be the default option to check violence. Closer to home is the unwillingness of political parties to cooperate for the common good; and domestic violence continues to rear its ugly head. Jesus insisted that such violence will only be checked to the extent that people, and cultures, deliberately choose to change. “Love your enemies” was Jesus’ challenge. In the meantime, the invitation to love any/ and every/one is its own reward. Despite failure, the inner peace that it nourishes is real, noticeable and unassailable — the experience of salvation.

Lent can be the appropriate time to take to heart St Paul’s comment about the three things that last: faith, hope and love. To become convinced of them takes time and effort. We need time alone with God, and we need silence if they are to grow and nourish us. This year may be the time for us to learn some form of contemplative prayer if we are still not sure how to. The reward is worth the effort. And if encounter with God can bring more love into our lives, our lives in turn bring more love into the world — and the powerful influence of violence is balanced a little more.

Lent - Fifth Sunday

In this Sunday’s Gospel passage from the Gospel of John we effectively have the “winding-up” of Jesus’ public ministry, and with it a brief recapitulation of the important factors in the author’s sense of Jesus’ significance.

By bringing a group of “Greeks” on stage, the Beloved Disciple underlined the universal import of Jesus’ mission and, with it, the Church’s mission also. In the Roman Empire of the time where the common language was Greek, and particularly to the Jewish mind, the word “Greeks” referred not simply to the inhabitants of the small nation of Greece but to the rest of the world beyond Judaism. Though Jesus’ personal ministry hardly afforded him time to work outside the borders of Palestine, his concern, nevertheless, was universal in its outreach — an important observation for the Gospel’s readers who were predominantly gentile converts — [“God loved the world so much...”].

In a brief reference to his coming death, Jesus made the memorable comment, “Unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain, but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest.” Death and apparent total failure, hardly inspirational in themselves, called for something of an “apologia”. Jesus had no “death-wish”. The imminent likelihood of that brutal death indeed had Jesus admitting, “Now my soul is troubled. What shall I say, ‘Father, save me from this hour’.” However, disregarding that natural reaction, Jesus quickly responded, “But it was for this very reason that I have come to this hour.” What the world saw as apparent failure held a central place in Jesus’ sense of his redemptive mission. Jesus’ brief prayer to his Father then concluded unexpectedly: “Father, glorify your name!”

Such things as unquestioned triumphalism, military victory, human glory and power, were only too common sources of the world’s suffering, and expressions precisely of the world’s sin and its need for salvation. As Jesus would emphasise in his coming trial, his kingdom was not ‘of this world’. Jesus insisted that his followers be clear about this: “Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life”. Rather than being failure, faith-inspired vision would see Jesus’ death as source of his “glorification”.

This theme of ‘glory’ occupied a central place in Jesus’ vocabulary. For him, ‘glory’ referred to a person’s inner identity and true worth. To ‘glorify’ meant to allow that person’s real identity and attractiveness to be seen externally and acknowledged. His prayer to his Father, “Father, glorify your Name” expressed his hope that the imminent unfolding of Jesus’ life and death would serve to let the Father’s infinite wonder and beauty become obvious to all. There was a uniquely beautiful relationship between the persons of the Trinity, a mutual relationship of infinite and intimate love between all three. Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, was the human revelation of the Father who loved him. He reflected and embodied that love — and made the Father’s love known to the world in human terms. Simply by being

truly and clearly himself, Jesus glorified the Father; the Father glorified Jesus; and in and through Jesus, the Father glorified himself.

Jesus hoped that his own fast approaching death would illustrate to those with eyes to see just how deeply he loved this world, however sinful it might be. He hoped that his love, made obvious by his death, would be seen, again by those with eyes that see, as motivated and empowered by the Father who loved him, and who loved this world.

As today's Gospel passage expressed it: Jesus' prayer, "Father, glorify your Name!" was answered by a "voice from heaven", mistaken by some of the bystanders as "a clap of thunder". The majestic voice declared: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

In the eyes of the Gospel's author, despite the world's hatred and violence expressed in the murder of Jesus, there was only and always love and gratuitous forgiveness on the part of God: Father, Son and Spirit.

Today's passage continued with Jesus' observation: "Now sentence is being passed on this world; now the prince of this world is to be overthrown." The 'prince of this world' is to be seen as the personification of evil, the one whom tradition has called 'the devil'. The devil is powerful, but the power involved is not infinite. It is the power to poison relationships — to make people envious and to put them into competition with each other, rather than to cooperate; to incite hostility and to sow disharmony, rather than to nourish hospitality and to seek agreement; to employ force and to use violence, rather than to negotiate and to seek consensus; to fight and go to war, to counter violence with greater violence, rather than to work for peace. The list goes on...

Jesus then concluded: "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all to myself." For Jesus, his death would be the moment of his engagement with and conquest of the world's evil. With every human reason to lose hope, to feel vindictive and bitter, to withhold forgiveness, as he hung on the cross he continued to respect and to love even his enemies. Jesus' victory was precisely the way of love. Love will eventually overwhelm the world's hostility and violence; and as disciples of this Jesus, we are the ones called to continue his work in the world. But we need to be more than half-hearted in our love. With wonderful exceptions, we have been little more than half-hearted over the centuries. We have thought of our own salvation, but little of changing our culture to a culture of love. Our mission is to love — and to attract others by our love, and in that way to bring the experience of salvation into our world.

As Lent draws to its conclusion, we might well ask ourselves: Have we learnt to see almsgiving as a symbolic form of solidarity, and a genuine expression of love, with others in need?

Have we let our prayer, quietly spent in our silent room, sensitise us more to the loving heart of God? Is our desire, like that of Jesus, to reveal God's love to our world through our love — just as Jesus desired so much to glorify his Father?

Have we uncluttered our lives enough through our fasting as to allow ourselves no longer to be distracted from a single-minded focus on the priority of simply loving those people who come into our lives?