

Homily for Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 27-28, 2024

(Bishop Paul Bird has prepared this homily for Masses on April 27-28 marking the 150th Anniversary of the Ballarat Diocese. Homilists are welcome to use this homily, in whole or in part, in Parish Masses that weekend.)

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell did not consider himself a Christian. In fact, he once wrote a book called *Why I Am Not a Christian*. Yet, when he looked at the problems facing the world, he did see a great need for one element of Christianity – the Christian practice of love.

He was asked if there is any way of overcoming the obstacles that stand in the way of human progress. This was his reply: “What stands in the way? Not physical or technical obstacles, but only the evil passions in human minds: suspicion, fear, lust for power, intolerance. The root of the matter is a very simple and old-fashioned thing, a thing so simple that I am almost ashamed to mention it, for fear of the derisive smile with which wise cynics will greet my words. The thing I mean – please forgive me for mentioning it – is love, Christian love, or compassion.”

In pointing to love, Bertrand Russell was focusing on what Christ himself had spoken of as basic. In his own time, Jesus was asked what was the most pressing need in the world. His answer was love – love of God and love of neighbour (Matthew 22:34-40). What kind of love? A love that is practical. This is clear in the text we had as the second reading for today’s Mass: “My children, our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active”. (1 John 3:18)

Society today struggles with many problems. Around the world there are millions who lack the bare necessities of life. There are many places devastated by war, Ukraine, countries in the Middle East and many other countries around the globe. In our country, there are many who are homeless. There are those who suffer violence. There was the shocking attack recently in the shopping centre in Bondi. There are many problems and they can seem so complex that we might feel paralysed, not knowing where to start. Yet we can do something.

There was a man who used to look after a St Vincent de Paul Shelter for the Homeless. He was often saddened that they did not have more room and more beds to accommodate everybody who came. But he found consolation in knowing that he could provide some assistance. He made sure there was always a big pot of soup and enough bread for everyone. As he said: “At least we can offer them some bread and soup.” As he prepared that meal for the hungry, that man was meeting not only the physical need for food but the deep need for personal care and attention, the great need that we all have – the need to be loved.

In parishes around the diocese this weekend, we are marking a special anniversary for our diocese. This year our diocese turns 150. It was in 1874 that Pope Pius the Ninth issued a decree setting up the diocese of Ballarat, a diocese that includes the western half of Victoria, stretching from the Murray River in the north to the coast in the south, from the Murray to the sea.

As we gather for Mass today, we give thanks for the faith of the people of our diocese throughout those 150 years. We pay tribute to the people who laid the foundations of our own parish. We pay tribute to those who laid the foundations of all the parishes of the diocese. We give thanks for all who have served our communities through the past 150 years.

Each of those years, no doubt, had its own particular challenges. Yet the underlying challenge has remained the same – the challenge to live as Christ has taught us, the challenge to love.

The letter of St John calls us to keep God's commandments and live the kind of life that God wants. What are the commandments that St John is referring to? They are the commandments to believe and to love. "God's commandments are these: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and that we love one another as he told us to." (1 John 3:23)

In the gospel, Jesus encourages us to stay close to him. He calls us to be one with him as a branch is one with the vine. If we stay united with him, our lives will be fruitful. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who remain in me, with me in them, bear fruit in plenty." (John 15: 5)

We give thanks for all those who have believed and loved in our diocese over the past 150 years. We give thanks for all who have been one with Christ, like branches of the vine. We give thanks for all who have shown practical Christian love. We pray that we might continue on the way of Christ in our time. May we show practical Christian love in our day. May we be one with Christ, like branches of the vine, now and in the years ahead. May the Spirit of Christ be with us – the Spirit of faith, the Spirit of compassion, the Spirit of love.