

25th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME YEAR A HOMILY 2020

FROM UNLIMITED FORGIVENESS TO UNLIMITED GENEROSITY

Mt 20.1-16 Is 55.6-9 Phil 1.20-27

Welcome once more to our virtual celebration of Eucharist here at St Therese's, now exactly 6 months on from church closure, from autumn equinox to spring equinox, as the light increases and the darkness decreases each day in springtime from now on, and coronavirus numbers hopefully going down so we can start to open up gradually soon. And school holidays start, as we hope too for school to resume face to face in Term 4, step by step by step.

Also, this is Social Services Sunday in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, so we acknowledge the great work done by the thousands of staff and volunteers, working in Catholic Social Services Victoria, to serve those in need in our broader community, applying Gospel values.

I don't know about you, but this strange time has provided the necessity for me to use a motor mower for the first time in my nearly 68 years, time to clean the fridge and oven, apart from the usual household chores, and more time to try to play the piano and catch up on reading!

We offer our sympathy to Leanne Torr, whose lovely mother Patricia died this Saturday at Arcadia, and again congratulate Jenny and Clarry Answerth, who married here at St Therese's Church, celebrating 60 years of marriage this week with their loving family, and Fred Carisse, who celebrated his 101st birthday at the end of August.

So now we gather again in spirit and pray together.

On the bookshelf in my office when I came here nearly 3 years ago, I found a thin book titled *Deathbed Conversions: Finding Faith at the Finish Line*. It recounts the stories of 14 different characters who took the leap into Catholicism, facing their mortality, not long before they died. Some had lived more or less virtuous lives than others, and a few had been out and out rogues, but the common ground was taking that final step of faith, before they headed into the unknown, as they perceived it. To name a few, Buffalo Bill, John Wayne, Oscar Wilde, Patricia Neal (Roald Dahl's ex-wife), Gary Cooper, King Charles II of England and Kenneth Clark, who wrote and presented the 1970's TV series *Civilization*. The conclusion is that it's never too late to make the move. Those of us who are *cradle Catholics* from birth might think it at first a bit unfair that their entitlement to eternal reward comes in the same way for them as for those, who might consider they've done their best to live good lives as Catholic Christians over the long haul! But there it is, the reality of an infinitely loving and forgiving God, as presented by Jesus throughout his public ministry.

It's never too late might be the message, but this is no excuse for procrastination about our decision to live the Christian life in action, and the need to take personal responsibility for using conscience and free will well in the choices we make in our day to day lives! Jesus' call is to respond to the Gospel here and now.

The Sunday lectionary jumps forward a chapter here, leaving out Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage, welcoming of the children, then story of the rich young man, and his warnings against preoccupation with material possessions and the wealthy facing up to the eye of the needle! All need interpretation or exegesis, but there's not room for everything in Matthew's Gospel to fit in on the 33 or so Sundays of Ordinary time of the Church's year!

Here we have a parable which can be related directly to our current circumstances. Useful employment is something that we all aspire to in adult life. Sometimes, too much emphasis can be given to what we do rather than who we are, however. Nevertheless, there is a certain worth and dignity in being productive, and being remunerated for our efforts. Only this week, the unemployment statistics were said to be better than anticipated or feared, in the present climate of the pandemic crisis, but figures can be rubbery, and not give the full picture, as many jobs are part-time. The current uncertainty and pressures on those in small business and other areas of work where the longer lockdown continues, the more difficult it becomes for many. That needs to be acknowledged and provision made to support those who have lost so much.

At present, at least many have the benefit of *JobKeeper* (including me) or *JobSeeker*, at present, to cushion the blows and losses, and there are the CentreLink, Medicare and Age Pension services available in what we like to consider is a just society. At the same time, there are many who fall into the gaps, such as Refugees and Asylum Seekers, overseas students and so on.

It does make us aware of the need for a just wage and also society's provision for those in need. In Jesus' time, the dependency was on family to support those not gaining income. There was no social security safety net, and the blame game was the easiest cop out, that those in dire circumstances caused their own problems, and that this was God's punishment.

We don't find this attitude in Jesus' outlook, as he moves through all levels of the society of his time, noting that he is constantly counter-cultural in his reaction of reaching out to women, children, sick, sinners, Samaritans, Gentiles and the needy in general. He likes to make us think twice about our instinctive reactions to what at first seems unfair, on the surface.

The commentaries on today's Gospel suggest this is not a story primarily about social justice and a fair wage, but on the unlimited generosity of a loving God who cares for each individual equally. It is, however, about a just wage, promised in the first place, to those who started work early. They say one denarius daily was sufficient to support oneself and one's family, and so a fair go was given to the longest and so hardest workers, but it could also be argued that the later starters needed as much, in order to support their dependants also. From that perspective, it's not so unfair, despite the natural reaction of those who'd done more hours.

It's not as if those out of work were *bludgers* or *slackers*, as they might be called colloquially, if they were intentionally avoiding employment. They just hadn't had the opportunity of work, and so don't deserve to be blamed for being idle or accused of laziness. What is more, Jesus is never one to point the finger, except to remind us to do that to oneself alone.

As scripture scholar Donald Senior CP puts it: *"The parable ends with a firm emphasis not on conventional assumptions about a fair wage, but on the sovereignty and generosity of the lord of the vineyard... (who) determines that the last shall be first and the first shall be last."* In Matthew's mind, he could well have been thinking of potential resentment of Christians of Jewish background, with a green eye of envy towards those who were seen as *"latecomers, such as the sinners and Gentiles gathered by Jesus and the mission of the early community, (who) seemed to enjoy the same status as those who had borne the heat of the day... Earlier scenes in the Gospel where the religious leaders protest Jesus' association with such social and moral outcasts imply a similar message."* I reiterate, it's never too late, but, for you and me, the time for action is now, all the same!

So, once again, we move from forgiveness and forgiving, to the reassurance and knowledge we are always loved, in the eyes of a merciful and gracious God, as revealed in Jesus. And don't say: ***"It's not fair"***, even though we might think it, as we continue to try to do our best as faithful disciples.