Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 25th October 2026, Pentecost 22

Readings: **Deuteronomy 34:1-12** **Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17**
1Thessalonians 2:1-13 **Matthew 22:34-46**

Before my current role based in Toowoomba, I was part of a Parish in North Rockhampton which had a long history of providing weekly RE classes at a local primary school. As a member of the teaching team I taught two classes each week for ten years, and these were for Anglican students in Grades 6 and 7. There's only so much you can do in a thirty-minute session, but in many ways I think God used those classes to bless, encourage, and sow seeds of faith.

We'd regularly divide the classes into two teams with all the girls on one side and all the boys on the other. Then we'd use a short quiz to see which of the teams remembered best what we had been working with and there was generally great energy, laughter, and eager hands reaching up to answer.

Over the two years – Grade 6 and 7 - we talked about the different genres of writing in the Bible and worked particularly with the letters and Gospels of the New Testament. Key parables were the 'Prodigal Son', and the 'Good Samaritan' – with the hope that through these stories each student would discover that they were deeply known and loved by God, and that in the course of their lives God wanted them to care for others.

One of the quiz questions at the end of the year asked how many laws there were in the Jewish religion at the time of Jesus. For the students that had not listened they'd tentatively suggest ten, because of the Ten Commandments, but this would infuriate their team-mates who had paid attention. Arms would strain and hands wave – before a keen student gave the correct answer: 'Six hundred and thirteen!' to the cheers of their team and the dismay of those who had missed out on an easy point!

The Pharisees were the Jewish religious professionals of their time, and I think they would have done very well in a religious quiz! Especially if it was based on their understanding of the first five books of what we call the Old Testament, and which they call 'The Torah'. They knew the three hundred and sixty-five 'do not' laws, and the two hundred and forty-eight 'do' laws, and part of their role in the Jewish community was to interpret these.

The Gospel reading today remembers these religious professionals asking Jesus which was the most important of all those laws.

We can't know for sure what their motivation would have been, but it seems unlikely that it was a genuine desire to seek wisdom! They may have been trying to undermine the credibility that Jesus had developed, and they would have been confident that they knew more than this itinerant rabbi.

'Hey, Jesus!' they asked, 'Which is the greatest commandment in the law?'

In his reply the Gospel writer of Matthew remembers Jesus drawing from two books in the Torah: Deuteronomy and Leviticus. From the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy came the affirmation that we are to 'love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our might…' and from the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus came the affirmation that, 'we are to love our neighbour as we love ourselves…' Then, Jesus concluded, 'On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

A powerful and recurring theme in the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus is that the most important thing we do in our lives is love, and his response to the Pharisee's question is an example of this and it draws from sacred writing they would have been very familiar with.

We can be thankful that we don't have to remember six hundred and thirteen laws, and instead have the clarity of just two commandments. But the simplicity is deceptive because when considered carefully they have implications for every aspect of a human life. For we are called to love God with everything that we are – heart, soul, mind, and strength; and by implication everything we have – our time and abilities; our work and leisure; and even our relationships and aspirations. These two commandments state simply that we are to love God and our neighbour…… throughout our life's journey.

But, how do we keep and sustain this focus on love… when our lives are complex and busy?

It is relatively easy to think about God and pray when we're at church; while we're singing songs of faith; listening to readings; and breaking bread together in memory of the one who walks with us each day. But when we return to our everyday lives, we inevitably interact with people who have other beliefs and priorities. Our egos can bump into theirs, or theirs can bump into ours, and before we realise it… we may start consciously or unconsciously competing for dominance and control… and love takes a back seat for a while!

In his first letter to the highly conflicted church in Corinth Paul wrote to a community about the centrality of love in a life of faith. In the thirteenth chapter he suggests that even the most remarkable gifts and abilities mean little unless they are leavened by love. A truth I

think that's important for each of us to revisit often, and particularly when we're seeking to calibrate or recalibrate our lives.

I think a key to recognising and relating with God in the midst of competing pressures each day is to make time and space to pray. Most of us will have some established daily rhythms for prayer, but things can happen in life that throw us out of rhythm and we flounder for a while. And, I think it's OK to flounder for a while… but, not for too long!

I am most aware of God's Spirit when I'm outside among trees. With the gentle rains we've had over the last week – after so many dry weeks – I even imagined the fruit trees in the orchard singing hymns of praise. I have had many ah-ha moments over the years heralded by a bird or a plant, or an insect of some kind.

One of those was on a sheep property west of Quilpie during a morning walk with the owner. As we walked a talked a blue wren appeared on a fallen tree. It bobbed a few times looking at us before flashing away through the gidgee. For those who are bird watchers this was a male Splendid Wren – *Malarus splendens*. I had seen photos, drawings, and painting of this bird – particularly in Western Australia – but it was the first time I had ever seen this bird in the wild.

Against the orange brown dirt, and the grey-greens of acacia foliage, the purplish-blue colour of this bird was startling. **It was like a herald about to announce something important and just as it got your attention it moved away… inviting you to follow.**

If we took the wren as a metaphor for God's Spirit, and the morning walk as a metaphor for our life's journey, I might suggest that prayer is the way we keep our eyes open to recognise the presence and activity of God.

For some seasons of our life there will just be glimpse enough to keep us going in search of more, while for other seasons we may feel constantly surrounded by wrens and their song! Or, constantly surrounded buy God's grace and love.

I wonder if we value God more when there's just a glimpse and we need to labour for weeks before seeing it again? Do we keep going because even a glimpse is enough to give meaning, purpose and joy?

My prayer for you and me is that the 'blue wren' of God's Spirit be clear to us often this week, and in the coming weeks, as we travel the last quarter of this year. **Because God's**

Spirit will more than delight us – it will sustain and shape us and, more and more, it will enable love to become part of who and how we are in the world.

For now, would you please join with me as we close in prayer:

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and your love. In the midst of our busyness this week, help us to pray, and open our lives a little more to your Spirit, so that we may better live with love, and make a difference for good. We ask this in the name of the one who said that it's all about love, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.