

Homily for people and parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 1st September 2024, Pentecost 15

Readings: Song of Songs 2:8-13
James 1:17-27

Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9
Mark 7:1-8, 14-23

Over the years I have been very fortunate to work with inspiring people and one of these was a priest in Rockhampton called Claire Dewar. Claire was a priest who loved people, and who shared her love of God with them. She was generous, patient, and always willing to go the extra-mile - whether you shared her faith, or you didn't; whether you treated her kindly, or you didn't... and this generosity of spirit is a rare thing. At her funeral there were beautiful hymns and a great affirmation of the blessing she had been in the lives of many.

However, the song that comes to my mind whenever I think of Claire is not a hymn, but the secular song, 'When Love Comes to Town!'! It is sung with passion and energy by the Irish singer Bono, and the American blues guitarist BB King, and is recorded on the U2 album 'Rattle and Hum'.

With great conviction they sing, *"...I was there when they crucified my Lord. I held the scabbard, when the soldier drew his sword. I threw the dice when they pierced his side. But, I've seen love conquer the great divide... When love comes to town I'm gonna catch that train! When love comes to town I'm gonna catch that flame! Maybe I was wrong to ever let you down, but I did what I did before love came to town!"*

Long before she became a priest Claire 'caught the train' of faith in Christ, and 'caught the flame' of God's Spirit. Using language from the letter of James this week I can safely say that Claire was a 'doer of the word'. She did not just preach about God's love from the pulpit, she visited many people who were isolated in their home and prayed with them at the altar of their kitchen table. She held their hands as they moved from this life to the next, and she wept with those who grieved their passing.

Having recognised that Claire was a 'doer of the word', I'd like us to think about how you and I are going in this area. Remember the text says: *"Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in the mirror, and, on going away, immediately forget what they are like..."* Claire had integrity and walked the talk. People could look at the choices she made, and the ways that she responded to people... and know she was a person of faith. How can we walk the talk, more often than not?

The Australian writer, Mike Frost, suggests that people who take Jesus seriously should be so familiar with the Gospels that their lives become 'marinated by Christ, and in Christ'! He affirms that if our lives are soaked in the stories of Jesus' life on earth, then there's a fair

chance that our lives and character will be more Christ like. 'Marinated in Christ' – now there's a helpful phrase for a culture that loves to BBQ!

When people are new to faith, or are reconnecting with faith after a time away, I am often asked by them which of the four Gospels they should read first. Many people suggest that Mark's Gospel is the best one to begin with because it's the shortest, and the most direct... However, I usually recommend Luke's Gospel because of his detailed description of the interactions that Jesus had with people, and because of the two core parables within it. 'The Prodigal Son' – in which Jesus teaches about the extraordinary nature of God's love; and 'The Good Samaritan' – in which Jesus teaches that we are to love others generously... even those that society looks down upon or has rejected.

These two parables great wisdom when considering the challenge from James to be '*doers of the Word*'. There are a whole range of possible responses, but I think love, prayer, and forgiveness are good places to start!

I suggest love first because it is everywhere in Scripture: God's love for the world, and for humanity; the particular love that Jesus had for the lost and the lonely; and the repeated call from Jesus to his disciples, then and now, to love God and love one another. How do people see this in my life, and yours? Is loving relationship with God, and loving relationship with other people, an integral part of who we are?

I suggest prayer second because public and private prayer nourishes our relationship with God, and with ourselves. Private prayer on a 'mountain', as well public prayer in a 'temple'. Prayer with others on a Sunday... as well as personal prayer each day of the week. Surely, prayer is an expression of trust that God is ever present... and real; and the activity of prayer is an opportunity to become centred in Christ, and energised by the Spirit. if we want to be '*doers of the Word*' – prayer will help!

Then, that uncomfortable challenge to forgive... '*Forgive us our sins, as we forgive others...*' we ask each time we pray the Lord's Prayer. '*Forgive your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...*' Jesus directs. Forgiveness is an important element of Christian faith... and, I think love and prayer help enable it.

So, is there a grudge we won't let go of; or, a deep hurt that continues to gnaw and niggle? Is there some work for me to do in this area, or you?

When people look at my life, or yours, do they see lives that are profoundly shaped by what we believe? Our shared faith that we are known and loved by God, and are called to know and love our neighbour. Our shared faith that God calls us to pray; and forgive. Our shared faith that God calls us to journey and use our gifts and abilities collaboratively to make a difference for good.

On this first day of Spring, let us commit to being, *'...doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves...'*

Would you please join me in prayer:

Loving God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives, and the gift of your love. We give thanks for the challenge to express our faith in action and ask that through your Spirit you help us be people who know your love, and who love others; people who look forward to meeting with you in prayer, and to learning from you each day. We pray in the name of the one who calls us to follow, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen