

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 20th October 2024, Pentecost 22

Readings: **Job 38:1-7 (34-41)**
Hebrews 5:1-10

Psalm 104:1-10, 26
Mark 10: (32-34) 35-45

Two weeks ago, I was drawn to preach from the Old Testament reading about Job... and this week find myself drawn to Job again! In this weekend's reading Job had not been resolutely accepting of his situation but had been wondering why terrible things had happened to his children, his servants, and livestock. He had asked his friends what he had done to warrant the torments of disease and suffering... and he had listed all the good he had done. He explained that he had lived a moral life by observing the laws of his religion, and he had been generous to those who were strangers, and despite all this God had let him suffer terribly. It just didn't seem fair!

Job's friends seemed to accept Job's reasoning before a new character, called Elihu, jumped in to challenge him. Elihu's rebuke of Job fills the five chapters prior to this week's reading and is well worth a read!

Today's reading describes God confronting Job by speaking out of a whirlwind. *"Gird up your loins like a man..."* Job hears, *"...and I will question you!"*

It's a terrifying thing to imagine and is full of drama. *"Gird up your loins like a man..."* said the all-powerful Creator of an ever-expanding universe, *"and I will question you!"*

It's worth considering in response to this whether we think or believe that God will hold us accountable for anything. I'm not talking about the minutiae of God asking why we didn't do our homework when we were in Grade 9, or about the times we lied to our parents about where we'd really been after school! I think more broadly that if we understand our lives to be gifts from God, and that what we do with our lives is, somehow, a gift back to God... then, what are we doing with our lives, and what guides us?

How are we going in the complex journey of loving God, and loving other people? How are we going in the challenging call to use and develop our abilities to bless human community, and make a more just world?

A we journey in life we will sometimes be knocked around by things and by people that's part of being human. We can be hurt by others, and we can cause others to be hurt. We can love, and when the object of our love is gone... we may grieve. That's just the way it is! We might sit in ashes for a while like Job. We might even mope around feeling lost, wondering why such a thing had happened.

In my mind, I sometimes imagine God suggesting that I, 'Gird up my loins like man!' – while Jesus sits with me in the ashes of my hurt and overwhelming. Jesus and God's Spirit holding me up in this, and then helping me stand again by myself.

When my dad died in 2018, and my mum died during the wilderness years of COVID restrictions, I was not with them. I was not even in the same country! The words of a poem by Maya Angelou expressed well my thoughts in the ashes of early grieving: *'...memory, suddenly sharpened, examines, and gnaws on kind words unsaid... promised walks never taken...'*¹ Of course, that sadness was well salted by good memories of times together, kindness given, wisdom offered, and love shared through the years.

Dad's favourite church service was Evensong and his most loved Evensong hymn affirms that *'The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended, the darkness falls at thy behest; to thee our morning hymns ascended, Thy praise shall sanctify our rest.'* The days God gave my parents have ended, but the days you and I have remain. The lives we have been gifted with are still unfolding. So, what are we to do? And, where are we to give priority?

When challenged to name the most important laws of his religion Jesus suggested that they were to love God, and love neighbour. He was then asked to define 'neighbour' and, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, he suggested that a 'neighbour' was not someone limited to people that we like but includes those we dislike, and those whom we have no prior relationship. This would have been challenging to consider then... and continues to be so in our time.

According to the Refugee Council of Australia, Australia settled 132,180 people between 2012 and 2022 which averages out to just over 13,000 people/year. These women, children, and men have generally come from countries in which there is terrible conflict, and they include Afghanistan, Syria, Northern Iraq, and Ukraine. We can helpfully understand that the people who come are our 'neighbours' from the global village. These people over time learn English, study, work, pay taxes and, if God allows, become friends.

Sometimes, I think it is easier to love a stranger who has come to Australia on a Humanitarian Visa than it is to love those we have become estranged from or are at odds with. In intimate relationships, within families, and between work colleagues... we bump into each other and sometimes cause hurt with words or actions and afterwards we're not sure how to reach out, or we don't want to, reconnect, or reconcile. Then days become weeks, weeks become months, months become years... and half a lifetime can go by.

Sometimes it is entirely appropriate not to reach out because there has been violence, abuse, and control. In such relationships we are called perhaps to love from a safe distance? However, I think there is wisdom in Maya Angelou's poem when there has been

indifference or neglect in a relationship. In these are there *'kind words unsaid...'* or, *'promised walks never taken..'*?

Are there some people that you have a particular relationship with in which you could offer some life-giving words through a letter, a phone call, or an email? Is there someone that you have a unique relationship with who you could take shopping, invite for a meal, or simply spend time with over a cuppa?

In some of these relationships we may feel like we'd have to 'gird up our loins' while in others, perhaps in most, it would simply mean re-prioritising things.

May God's Spirit bless and guide each of us as we consider who we might reach out to, and how we might do this in the coming week.

Would you please join me in prayer as I close:

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and your love, and we give thanks for all who have blessed our lives with wisdom and love. In your mercy, please help us never take you, or those we share life with, for granted. We pray in the name of the one who shows us the way, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ Poem reference: *'Ailey, Baldwin, Floyd, Killens, and Mayfield'*, by Maya Angelou. From the anthology *'I shall not be moved'*, published by Virago Press in 1990.