

# Homily for People and Parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2024, Pentecost 9

Readings: 2Samuel 7:1-14a  
Ephesians 2:11-22

Psalm 89:21-38  
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

As these words are given and received, I pray for the blessing of our loving, liberating, and life-giving God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We bring our lives each week to worship and, hopefully, we each have an expectation that there will be something that will speak to us in the readings we will hear. Words that the Spirit of God will use to challenge us, or words that may bring us comfort. In worship we offer the complex reality of our lives to God, our hopes and fears, and our ongoing need for meaning and purpose.

So, at some stage over the next few days, I encourage you to read through this week's Gospel reading and sit with it for a while. Some verses, or phrases, or even single words will stand out more than the others... and it's worth writing them down. Why do those words speak powerfully to you? How do they connect with what's going on in your life, in the life of your family, or in the life of the world?

I will offer the words and phrases that have stood out for me, hoping that they will resonate and be a blessing, but there may be more for you that uniquely connects with your life.

The Gospel writer describes the disciples coming to Jesus after a busy time of ministry, and in response he encourages them to, *'Come away to a deserted place, and rest for a while.'* This may not sound surprising, but I think there is much wisdom for us even in these few words because we live in a society which applauds busyness, to such a degree that even in our leisure we can be scheduled hour by hour. We also live in a time where there are endless opportunities for our minds to be distracted and entertained and this can be exhausting.

To go to a deserted place for a time of rest and reflection – seems indulgent, and yet if we don't do this with some regularity there can be danger for our mental, spiritual, emotional, and psychological health. Without such time the opportunity for renewal, the development of wisdom, and creativity is much diminished. Jesus said to his disciples then, and now, make sure you have some 'time-out' from the busyness of your lives to be re-charged.

A recurring theme in this Gospel reading is that many came to Jesus hoping to find healing. We understand that sick people were brought to him and that many of these were healed.

I think in our own time we bring our longing for greater wholeness to Christ in prayer. We bring our 'dis-ease' and doubts, hoping and trusting that in Christ we will find peace and freedom; healing and wholeness; identity and purpose.

The Gospel talks about Jesus having compassion for the crowds because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and we may readily embrace an identity as sheep who are loved and cared for by Jesus known as the Good Shepherd.

We listen for his voice in prayer, trusting that he will lead us to green pastures, and refresh our soul; he will guide us in right pathways, and be with us even through the Valley of the Shadow of death.

However, I think we are called to be both sheep and shepherd? Women and men who know that they are loved by God, and who desire and work for God's love and justice to be experienced by others. It is this desire and work to see God's love and justice experienced by others I'd like us to touch base with today.

In 2016 the Royal Commission into Family Violence outlined what most people had a sense of anecdotally. It detailed that on average one woman in Australia each week is murdered by a current or former intimate partner, and that one in three women over the age of fifteen have experienced physical or sexual violence.

In response the 2017 General Synod of the Anglican Church established the National Anglican Family Violence Project which published a report. One of the confronting realities named in the report was that the incidence of domestic violence (in its various forms) was slightly higher among those who identified as Anglican, compared with the incidence of domestic violence in the wider community!

This was deeply unsettling to hear. Why would Anglicans experience higher rates of domestic violence than the wider community?

Helpfully, the researchers explored this with respondents and identified four elements of Christian teaching that, however unintended, help to create this. The first is the understanding that marriage is lifelong, no matter how bad things get. No matter how controlled, how frightened, how beaten... there was for many years the understanding that leaving was not an option, and that to leave was somehow shameful.

The second is that wives should always submit to the authority of their husbands. This is well reflected in the first two wedding vows for women in the Book of Common Prayer which are to 'obey' and 'serve'. In that same service the vows for men are to 'love' and 'comfort'!

The third is the understanding that we are to repeatedly forgive others when they do the wrong things by us, and that we are to forgive unconditionally. Matthew's Gospel suggests that we are to repeatedly 'turn the cheek' (Mt. 5:39) and forgive 'seventy times seven' times (Mt 18:21-22).

And the fourth is the understanding that suffering is an inevitable part of Christian faith – for didn't Jesus say, 'take up your cross'? (Mt 16:24).

Let's return to the language of today's Gospel in which Jesus suggested that hungry and hurting people were like 'sheep without a shepherd'. I think those in situations of domestic violence are hungry for a life in which they are not afraid or diminished, and they are hurting from past and current experience. It is likely that most of us here know someone who has experienced domestic violence and have given them some level of support. It is also likely that some here will have experienced domestic violence themselves, or be living with violence now.

On the basis of the report, Ten Commitments were recommended to the standing committee of the General Synod, and these were endorsed as being ways to helpfully address aspects of Anglican culture and belief that give permission for Domestic Violence.

Inevitably education is a key element, and this means education and training for the whole Church – both clergy and laity. Such education would give clarity about what is life-giving and what is not life-giving? About the different ways domestic violence can be experienced, and what support and intervention can bring about positive change. It is important also to recognise and work with those in our local communities who have expertise in this area as counsellors, and social workers.

This work will take years of commitment, as any culture change does, but in God's grace I think it is transformational work the Church is called to. For, surely, we want all women in our church to feel safe wherever they are, and we want them to flourish? Indeed, we would want all women in our society, and world, to feel safe wherever they are, and to flourish. For girls and women are just as much beloved children of God as boys and men.

Would you please join me as I close in prayer:

Gracious God, we give thanks for your love and for your call to be people who are compassionate, just, and courageous. As individuals, and as a community of faith, open our eyes to the things you would have us do to bring hope and new life to those who need it this week. We pray in the name of the one who calls us to love, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.