

Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 22nd September 2024, Pentecost 18

Readings: Proverbs 31:10-31

Psalm 1

James 3:1-12

Mark 9:30-37

I have very happy memories of being a school chaplain in Rockhampton, and the Latin motto of that school is carved on my crozier – *Macte virtute et literis*. It means ‘Growing character and scholarship’ – and I think each of these are helpful aspirations.

The challenge is how to develop character and scholarship in the midst of everything else that goes on in life – and how to keep their development a priority. We’d each have ideas about how to develop scholarship and a lifelong love of learning, but how can we develop character in the lives of young people, and in our own lives?

In Western education there is a long history of valuing competition above collaboration. We reward the fastest, the strongest, and the most intelligent for their individual achievement. Increasingly, we also recognise when young people have given their best... but, how do we recognise and reward the development of character?

I think one of the signs of a growing maturity in young people is when they start giving back. Those who achieve well in sport, give up time to be coaches; and those who achieve academically, give up time to tutor younger students, or help with homework clubs.

As we consider this we might consider what Christian maturity looks like? A daily rhythm of prayer and Bible reading will help to give this shape but perhaps a sign is when we move from primarily thinking about the things God might do for us, to considering what we might do for God! And, not doing those things because we want to get credit with God, but because we’re profoundly grateful for all that we have received and, somehow, we want to give back.

In this week’s Gospel reading there had been some discussion among the disciples travelling with Jesus about who among them was the greatest! I love that the Gospel writers don’t try and sugar things up and portray the disciples as being constantly calm, wise, and humble... because it would be hard for us to measure up to that. Clearly, they were sometimes agitated, foolish, and proud, and ‘who was the greatest?’ had been the topic between them that day.

This may sound competitive, and we might wonder where it came from, but the language of God’s Kingdom was being used by Jesus, and in every human experience of ‘Kingdom’

there was, and continues to be, significant hierarchy. So... who would be 'chief of staff', 'foreign minister', 'treasurer', or 'ambassador to Rome'?

Jesus had overheard what they'd been discussing and instead of letting it go he asked, "*What were you talking about?*" Just imagine how sheepish those disciples would have been as they heard that question... so sheepish in fact that they said nothing. Jesus sat them down and challenged them with these words, "*Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all...*" For a hierarchical society in which servants were very low in the social order, I think this would have been confronting.

'If you want to be great in God's Kingdom...' Jesus seemed to be saying, '...you personally have to look after the needs of others.' It was counter-cultural then and continues to be counter-cultural today. Reinterpreting this we could say, 'the bosses have got to serve the workers; and the bosses and the workers have got to serve those who are unable to work because of age or disability!' for... "*Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all, and servant of all...*"

Then Jesus added to the challenge by picking up a child and saying, '*If you welcome a kid like this, you welcome me – and if you welcome me, you welcome God.*' Little children back then had no social standing in the hierarchy of society, and yet here was Jesus saying... 'I am in these nobodies, and God is in them as well! So, open your eyes – see things in a new way – and change the way you understand things.'

If we embraced this way of thinking I wonder what motto could help us to keep it front of mind? Perhaps the challenge to 'be last and serve all' could read, 'Take care of others, before taking care of yourself!' Or, 'Make a positive difference in the life of one other person every day!'

Imagine that – because of our faith in Christ we might each resolve to, 'Make a positive difference in the life of at least one other person every day!' In this I'm reminded of the words of dismissal at the end of worship: "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord – in the name of Christ Amen." Go in peace - to make a positive difference in the life of at least one other person each day!

A possible motto that reflects the challenge to recognise God in those considered least, could be, 'Everybody is somebody in God's eyes!' Or, 'In God's Kingdom, everybody matters!' Or, 'Justice, love, and welcome are for all people... and not just for some!'

You are probably smiling when you hear me clumsily trying to create a motto from this tough teaching in the Gospel, but I often have these sorts of conversations with Parish Councils when I ask them what the mission of their Parish is. In a succinct way, how do Parishes articulate what they believe God has called them to do and be. I think it is worth

thinking and praying about and wrestling with, because once named it has the potential to give a clear sense of purpose for all activity within a Parish.

For some years the Diocesan vision has been that *Parishes, Anglican Schools, and Anglicare* – be an interdependent network of **flourishing faith communities**. This is based on the understanding that if a community is proclaiming and serving, worshipping and learning... there is a far chance it will be flourishing in some way!

Over the last year important questions have been asked that include, ‘What does flourishing look like when you’re numerically small?’ This is an important question given that more than half of the parishes in the Diocese have less than fifty people attending church each week. What does flourishing look like when we’re small?

Another helpful question asks if people are really longing to flourish, or is there a greater longing to be nurtured in life and faith, connected to others through friendship, and known and loved by God and by other people?

Do you think that you are flourishing now, and are you part of a congregation or parish that is flourishing? The language of ‘flourishing’ is deeply connected to the affirmation of Jesus that he came for people to ‘have life in all its fullness...’ (John 10:10).

What does ‘life in all its fullness’ mean when we’re twenty years old; when we’re fifty; or, when we’re eighty? Perhaps, being nurtured, connected and loved in all those seasons of life are better things to aim for? Would love to hear your thoughts.

For now, please join me as I close in prayer:

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives, and the gift of your love. We give thanks for the Gospel challenge to serve, and to recognise you in each person. We thank you for words that shape and guide and ask for wisdom in the way we can best respond to them. We pray in the name of the one who shows us the way, Jesus Christ our Lord, and friend.

Amen