

Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 29th December 2024, Christmas 1

Readings: 1Samuel 2:18-20, 26
Colossians 3:12-17

Psalm 148
Luke 2:41-52

Here we are – the last Sunday of the year - and in that strange space between Christmas and New Year celebrations. Hopefully, there's been time for each of us to look back at the journey of this year, and have some plans in mind for 2025. We may have already identified a New Year resolution to take forward, or some themes that will give shape and purpose to our lives. Reflecting on the readings for this weekend, I think there is something we might helpfully consider at this pivot point between one year and the next! I'd like to start with Santa, then go to the Psalm, before affirming some wisdom in an old letter!

It may seem strange to start with Santa, but I think we can each be guilty of relating with God, as a giant Santa in the sky. Someone with divine power who if we're good, will grant our wishes! So, our intercessory prayers can sometimes look like amplified Christmas lists for Santa. We might pray, 'Holy God... please can you make it rain in Victoria to put out the fires, and bring a sustainable peace in the Middle East. Please could you heal all those who have cancer particularly Aunty Betty, and while you're about it, please help my daughter get a job! Oh, and one more thing - you know I've bought a Lotto ticket for this weekend: if you let me win – I promise to be generous. Amen!

With the exception of the Lotto ticket request, I think we've all prayed in a similar fashion at some stage and in this way of praying there not much gratitude, or space to listen... but, there is a long list of things we'd like God to do for other people and for ourselves!

In contrast Psalm 148 asks God to do nothing! Instead, in fourteen short verses the Psalm exhorts various parts of creation to praise God: all the heavens, and all the angels; the sun and moon and oceans; the sea monsters, and even fire, hail, snow and frost; the mountains and hills; the fruit trees, and wild animals; all creeping things, and flying birds. Then it exhorts all of humanity to praise: kings and princes; men and women; old and young together... praise the Lord!

With the insights that we enjoy from science we could add more detailed things at both macro and micro levels. We could say: 'Distant galaxies and black holes – praise the Lord!' and, 'Protons and electrons - praise the Lord'. We could say, 'Viruses and bacteria – Praise the Lord!' and, 'Blue whales and giant squid – praise the Lord!'

I think praise in this Psalm is an interesting thing because it affirms that God, as Creator, is responsible for everything that exists, and that without God nothing would exist. When we

accept this way of understanding the world then gratitude will not be far away. Things that we take for granted suddenly become valued. Even relationships that we take for granted become suddenly valued. The strange thing is that too often we do not value things until they are diminished, or are taken from us, and this is true even about the gift of life itself.

In the introduction to his excellent book 'A Short History of Nearly Everything'¹ Bill Bryson writes this to the reader as an antidote for taking life for granted:

"Welcome. And congratulations. I am delighted that you could make it. Getting here wasn't easy, I know. In fact, I suspect it was a little tougher than you realise. To begin with, for you to be here now trillions of drifting atoms had somehow to assemble in an intricate and curiously obliging manner to create you. It's an arrangement so specialised and particular that it has never been tried before and will only exist this once. For the next many years (we hope) these tiny particles will uncomplainingly engage in all the billions of deft, co-operative efforts necessary to keep you intact and let you experience the supremely agreeable, but generally under-appreciated state known as existence...

...Not only have you been lucky enough to be attached since time immemorial to a favoured evolutionary line, but you have also been extremely – make that miraculously – fortunate in your personal ancestry. Consider the fact that for 3.8 billion years, a period of time older than the Earth's mountains and rivers and oceans, every one of your forebears on both sides has been attractive enough to find a mate, healthy enough to reproduce, and sufficiently blessed by fate and circumstances to live long enough to do so. Not one of your pertinent ancestors was squashed, devoured, drowned, starved, stuck fast, untimely wounded or otherwise deflected from its life's quest of delivering a tiny charge of genetic material to the right partner at the right moment to perpetuate the only possible sequence of hereditary combinations that could result – eventually, astoundingly, and all too briefly in you." Praise the Lord!

Good to be reminded that the lives we so often take for granted are an extraordinary – even miraculous gift. That our health, and ability to reason, are extraordinary – even miraculous - gifts.

The writer of the Letter to the Colossians encouraged those who had faith in Christ to '*...clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience... to bear with one another... and forgive each other and... above all be clothed in love which binds everything together...*' (Colossians 3:12-17). The writer suggests that we are to have '*...gratitude in our hearts...*' ...and, '*...be thankful.*'

So could more praise of God, and more thankfulness be helpful in giving us focus next year? I will find them both helpful and a challenge. Praise and thankfulness in the midst of our

busyness! Praise and thankfulness in the midst of our striving! Praise and thankfulness to the One who gives the peace that the world cannot give.

I invite you to join me in focusing on thankfulness this weekend as we look forward to the new year that will begin this week. Looking back over the last year, what are three things that you are particularly thankful for? So that they are not quickly forgotten we could helpfully write them down on a piece of paper, or three dot points on the mirror (whiteboard marker), as a daily starter to prayer this week.

Please join me as we close in prayer now...

Gracious God, we give thanks that in you we live and move and have our being. We give thanks for life and love, and for the reminder to praise you in all seasons. Through your Spirit, please give us a renewed sense of wonder and purpose in the midst of our living. We pray in the name of the One who shows us the way, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ **A Short History of Nearly Everything** – published 2003 by Doubleday, © Bill Bryson 2003.