

Homily for people and parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 9th June, Pentecost 3

Readings: **Genesis 3:8-15**
2Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1

Psalm 138
Mark 3:20-35

When I was learning to sing in Hebrew as a theological student in Brisbane, the Rabbi - Cantor explained that he would first teach me his understanding of the Hebrew words because they came from the sacred texts of Jewish faith, before they became sacred texts in ours! What we call the first five books of the Old Testament, is known in Judaism as 'The Torah', or 'The Teaching' - and the Rabbi explained that even in Judaism there were different ways of interpreting the wisdom within it.

Some believe that the two Creation stories of Genesis should be taken literally, and that all of humanity came from an individual man called Adam, and an individual woman called Eve. While others believe that the story should be interpreted as an allegory which affirms that all human life comes from God, and that the brokenness of the world originates in disobedience. We know the two stories well and often blend them together to make one, so here's a summary of the blend:

At some stage in the beginning of things, God made a man, but the man got lonely. So, God made a woman, and they enjoyed deep friendship with each other. They also enjoyed deep friendship with God who asked them not to eat from the tree of knowledge, which grew in the centre of the garden. Things went well for a while, but then a snake spoke to the woman and suggested that if she ate the forbidden fruit she would be like God. So, she ate, and persuaded the man to eat, and they realised... that they were naked!

For some reason they did not want God to see them naked, so they hid. When God asked the man why he'd eaten fruit from the tree, he was unwilling to take responsibility and blamed the woman. She in turn was unwilling to take responsibility and blamed the snake! And, the story suggests, because of their choices, there were significant consequences for each of them. From that time on the man would have to work hard to get food from the soil, the woman would experience pain in child-birth, and the snake would crawl on his belly, and eat dust... forever.

This ancient story seeks to answer such important questions as, Where did we come from? Where did things go wrong? and, What do we do now? The answers offered to those in the Genesis story are profound for they suggest that we are each made by God, and were made in God's image; that we are given the ability to make choices, and that when we make poor choices there will be consequences. Further, that one important consequence would be an impaired relationship with God.

When we read other parts of the Old Testament we find various ways that the Jewish community sought to improve their relationship with God. Repentance was visibly demonstrated by wearing uncomfortable sackcloth, while fasting from food. Birds and animals were killed and offered to God, and grain, olive oil, and wine were burnt. Other religions of that time, and in that part of the world, offered human sacrifice – but Judaism did not do this.

The American Rabbi, Joseph Telushkin, suggests that after the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in AD70 the understanding about animal sacrifice in Judaism was replaced by a great emphasis on ethical living. Instead of sacrificing animals for sin, people would instead sacrifice their inclination to live selfishly by following the religious laws of the Torah and these are described particularly in Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

Reform Judaism in the nineteenth century termed this belief ‘ethical monotheism’ and grounded it in the critique given by some Old Testament prophets. For, the prophet Isaiah wrote: *“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or of goats.”* (Isaiah 1:11). While the prophet Amos wrote more strongly, *“I hate, I despise your festivals, and take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.”* (Amos 5:21-22).

So, what does God want of us?

The prophet Micah suggests in response to this question, *“He has told you, O mortal, what is good and what does the Lord require of you: but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.”* (Micah 6:8)

We are not Jewish – but I think there can be a fair degree of ethical monotheism in our faith? This might cause us to think that if we do the right thing, live moral lives, and are kind... then God will be happy with us? But, the letters of Paul suggest that no amount of justice, generosity, and kindness will be enough. Indeed, the only hope we have is through faith in Christ.

This is not to say we should not live moral lives but that the motive to live a moral life becomes different. We do not choose to live moral lives to get credit with God – but, rather, do this because we love God. Let’s explore this in response to a well-known and developing issue in Australian society

For some time now there is a national awareness that there is not enough housing for all Australians, and because of this the cost of available housing for sale and rent is high. For example, the availability of housing stock for rent in Toowoomba is less than 1%! I met with three emergency relief providers in Toowoomba last month and their sense is that the

number of people seeking help has increased by at least one third in the first quarter of this year. This is a confronting reality, particularly as the winter temperatures drop in the town I call home.

If a core understanding of Christian faith is to love God and love neighbour... how do we love those neighbours who are rough sleeping on park benches and doorways; sleeping in their cars because they have no place to call home; or are sleeping on the couches of friends and acquaintances?

The Parish of Toowoomba West has thought and prayed deeply about this and have responded in the following four ways:

1. They have worked collaboratively with a small number of other churches to have volunteers trained by an organisation called 'Winter Shelter' so that on one night of each week throughout winter their Parish Hall is set up with beds for people who are homeless, and those 'guests' receive an evening meal and breakfast from caring people in a safe environment.
2. The Parish collect and sort second hand clothing and other items for a garage sale once a month, and are often able to help 'guests' sleeping in the parish hall with a second set of warm clothing, and other useful items... like blankets.
3. In addition, a small number of people in the Parish volunteer at a local soup kitchen which offers food and support each day of the year.
4. Food is also collected by the Parish and is donated to the neighbouring Parish of St Luke's, Toowoomba, which has a pantry-based ministry for those who are homeless or are doing it tough.

I find this compassionate response to a complex issue to be deeply grounded in the Gospel call to love neighbour. It was discerned through prayerfully reflecting on the issue and asking the question, What can we do... together? And, What would God have us do... together?

I have a good sense as to how the Parish of Toowoomba West is doing this... and helpfully ask the question, 'How am I responding to human need in my context as an individual, and collaboratively with others?' It may well be a helpful question for all of us.

Please join me, as I close in prayer:

Holy and life-giving God we give thanks for your love and for the work of your Spirit in our lives. Thank you for the for the places we call home, and for the food we'll eat this week. We lift to you all in our world who are homeless, and who wonder where their next meal will come from. Please bless the Parish of Toowoomba West, and all who seek to offer shelter, food, and friendship to those on the edges of society. We pray in the name of the one who said, 'Love your neighbour, as you love yourself', Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen