

Homily for People and Parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 17th March 2024, Lent 5

Readings: **Jeremiah 31:31-34**

Hebrews 5:5-14

Psalms 119:9-16

John 12:20-33

For years I have been fascinated by seeds and seed pods. So, the shelves of my study have many kinds of seed pods sitting in front of the books, with a magnifying glass, and an identification book handy. The long flat pods of the *poinciana*, the tough envelope pods of *jacaranda*, the starfish-like pods of the *crows ash*, and many different pine cones! I've got *brachychiton* seed pods from Miles, *banksia* pods from Byron, and a huge Bunya-Pine cone, which has the largest seeds of them all. In my workshop I have jars of seeds for future planting, and these include *agapanthus*, and the seeds taken from a prize-winning sunflower in Rockhampton. Different textures, shapes, and sizes... each with the potential to be something more.

In John's Gospel today (John 12:20-33) Jesus is remembered saying, *"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit..."* Now I'm not sure about a grain producing fruit and wonder if the imagery is a bit blurred. You can plant a grape seed and get much fruit, and you can plant a grain of wheat and get many grains... but, you can't plant a grain of wheat and get fruit! Maybe it's a figure of speech, and the important thing to remember is that from a single seed can come an abundance?

In the physical world most seeds have to be put in the earth and have the right combination of warmth and moisture to germinate. Then something happens within the seed and a root goes out seeking nutrients, and a shoot makes its way to the surface seeking light. The energy needed to grow both root and shoot comes from the seed, so that as the plant develops the, seed diminishes... until there is no seed, there is only seedling.

The reading anticipates the time that Jesus would die and be laid in a tomb. The time when he would go into the earth, leaving his friends fearful about what might happen next. However, the reading also anticipates resurrection new life.

We know from our experience of growing things that the green shoot which emerges after planting looks very different to the seed that was initially planted and this resonates with the experience of Mary Magdalen who initially failed to recognise Jesus after resurrection. She was looking for a broken body, and thought Jesus was the gardener... until he called her by name.

Some people have wondered in fiction and movie making what would have happened if Jesus had not been willing to die. What if he had decided to stop challenging the religious

authorities, and just settled down for a quiet life somewhere? My sense is that if he had made that choice there would be stories from him about how to live a good and ethical life, but there would be no resurrection hope. There would be great values for us to live by, but not the promise of Emmanuel, God with us for all time; not the opportunity for relationship nourished by prayer; not the blessing of God's Spirit present and active in each of our lives.

In dying Jesus made possible eternal life, and in leaving he left the mandate to make disciples, and love others. I often wonder how we're going with the mandate to make disciples. There can be a temptation to have a private relationship with God, and consequently a self-interested spirituality. The kind of spirituality that prays for a parking space at the shops when it's teeming with rain, while driving past people getting drenched! The kind of spirituality that treats God like Santa with long lists of things we'd like done and has little inclination to consider what God might have us do.

In some seasons of our lives we can be like seeds that are full of unrealised potential, sitting in jars on a workshop bench. Maybe our churches can sometimes feel like those jars and we can feel like the seeds. We desperately hope that people will come in and join us, but we're reluctant to get 'planted' in the soil outside the jar because this has the potential to demand much of us.

But, surely God calls us out of the jar of the church to be faith filled people? At work, at home, at school, at university... wherever we are; that we have a strong sense of a freedom to live life generously, joyfully, & with courage. Live life with the freedom that comes from faith in Christ.

So where are you at this time of your life? Are you in a jar – conscious of unfulfilled potential, and not sure how to germinate and grow? Or, are you well planted in the soil of life and faith... conscious that, however imperfectly, you are growing, you are making a difference in the lives of others and are bearing fruit?

We're two weeks away from celebrating Easter so it's a good time to be thinking about where we are with God. If we have a sense of being confined in a jar and we're looking for a new beginning, please take that into prayer. And, if we have a sense of being well and truly planted – but it's proving costly, please take that need for new energy and blessing into prayer. Because, ultimately it is in him that we live and move and have our being.

Would you please join me as I close in prayer:

Holy God, thank you for the gift of our lives, and the gift of your love. In your grace please give us courage to live life generously and be a blessing in the lives of others. We pray in the name of the one who calls us to follow, Jesus the Christ, Amen.