

Third Sunday in Lent – 2017

When you move into a new community or parish or workplace you inevitably talk to others about where you've come from and what you've done in the past. You talk about your hopes and ideas and in doing this you get to know your new community and it gives the opportunity to reflect, it's about self-discovery as well. I have found myself doing this over the last couple of months. I have been thinking about important times, when life changing events occurred. I have been thinking about 1991. In 1991 my first child was born and things changed for Susan and I; a stranger came into our life, a noisy stranger, things have never been the same! I googled 1991 the other day and I saw that the American rock band REM released a record called 'Losing my Religion' in that year. It was a hit, but a strange one. The lyrics were obscure, difficult to understand, the video that went with it was equally strange. The thrust of the song seemed to be about the loss of certainty, the anxiety that we feel when we encounter something or someone that doesn't conform to our depiction of how the world should be. The video clip shows the arrival of a stranger, an old man with wings. I didn't then, but I now know that it was based on a short story by Gabriel Garcia Marquez called 'A very old man with enormous wings: a tale for children.' It's an odd story about the arrival of an odd character and the reaction by the locals; they didn't cope well with the stranger in their midst. They lacked insight, humility, imagination they failed to see the truths presented by his arrival, in essence they had lost their religion.

Part two of our Lenten study this past week asked us to consider finding Jesus in the needy and the stranger. It was demanding, thought provoking. We wrestled with the complexity of the issues, the scarcity of resources, the lack of skills. We heard stories of people offering food, meals, a sandwich, only to find them uneaten, unwanted. Of folk offered housing only to leave it to live on the streets or in the bush. We wondered about poverty in Australia today, we automatically tend to think of material poverty, but we need to think again, there are poor people in our community living with material wealth. There are no simplistic solutions because each individual situation is quite different. We finished our study with a brief reflection on 'being a stranger' and this helped, the issue is quite often simply that we are strangers to each other.

Today we hear of a Jewish man talking with a Samaritan woman, we sometimes don't get the context, we sometimes forget that this is an outrageous breach of norms for both these folk. This does not, must not happen! The Jews and the Samaritans are family yes, but estranged brothers and sisters, they share the same God, the same spiritual ancestry, the same religion, though they worship in different places and they argue over their sacred texts. The issue was not so much their difference but that they were very much alike! Jesus engages with this woman listens to her and

reminds her that both her place of worship and his will be one day supplanted by true religion, 'The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.' True religion not one not bound by place neither the Samaritan shrine on Mt Gerazim, or the Temple on Mt Zion. In this conversation we can see the reconciliation that lies at the heart of Jesus' ministry and importantly how that reconciliation is achieved, Jesus cared...through encounter... dialogue, can we say they were losing their religion?

I found this useful in my thinking about our care, about the idea of strangers, we fail to care because we don't understand, we fail to engage in dialogue to listen. All too often we are rather utilitarian in our approach...find the problem and fix it! We can get our heads around care for the needy, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, visit the prisoners, care for the sick and the aged. But there is more, poverty is deeper, estrangement is a reality for many, there is a sense in which we are called to a very particular ethic, we could call it a narrative – care ethic.

We need first to listen to others story and understand their perspectives. We need to understand the person's identity and context; in doing so we are hearing their story, their narrative. Most of us here this morning have a very clear sense of our identity and context, we have a narrative that speaks of who we are where we have come from. Telling that story is important, without the opportunity to tell our story we are impoverished, we are misunderstood, and we fail to find the care we most need ...reconciliation. This is the issue faced by our indigenous, by asylum seekers, all those who have suffered any kind of abuse or oppression, their stories have not been heard, they are drowned out by the dominant narrative. Jesus masterfully listens to the woman's story and engages in the process of reframing, helping her see things anew. In doing so she is engaged, enlivened, motivated she returns to her home and is able to be an apostle, to play a role in that community. On one level what Jesus engages in is a simple conversation, interestingly this is the longest recorded conversation of Jesus' in the gospels.

We struggle with an ethic of care because of an element of 'us and them' is ingrained in our very being. Jesus gets behind this by reminding us that spirit and truth are universal and break down all barriers and there is that sense that if we are willingly and able to listen our differences disappear. But we are kidding ourselves if we think this is easy, it is challenging stuff, but it is the very heart of our faith. There's a sort of paradox here. If we fail to engage with the stranger, the needy, we are in danger of losing our religion, being Christ for others and seeing Christ in them is a fundamental of our faith without that...well. But we are fearful of the stranger because we know that like the Samaritan woman we might be changed by our encounter, this is unsettling it may upset some deeply held ideas and beliefs, we may see Christ in a whole new and different way... we may lose our religion.

Perhaps this is what Lent is about. It is about stripping back the superficiality of religion and engaging at a different level. 'Religion' said Karl Marx 'is the opium of the masses.' We can use our Lenten journey to discover how much our religion is indeed a crutch, a shield against the real world, something we do privately with likeminded folk, and endeavour to engage in spirit and in truth as we broaden our horizons and find Christ in the most surprising places and people, careful though... you may lose your religion!