

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost 2017

Last Saturday at Kankinya Nursing Home Deacon Robin and I spent time with a very frail 96 year old. She had led a full life. Born in England. Living in various places in the world with her military husband and after living in Africa for many years finally retiring to Australia where her two children were living. She was a no-nonsense type and both Robin and I had warmed to her over the weeks and months she had been a resident. Last Saturday she was restless and not communicative, we prayed with her and anointed her. The nursing staff came in to assist with medication and she passed away peacefully on Saturday night.

There continues to be a strong push among some groups to legalise Euthanasia. The Victorian Government are to bring legislation forward before years end to permit assisting dying, it remains contentious, and rightly so. Those extolling the virtues of assisted dying often do so because they have seen their loved ones having to deal with long and debilitating illnesses. But I do wonder sometimes if they have themselves have found it all too difficult to bear rather than the person who is ill. We do need to put to bed the myth that our places of care are full of people dying in agony whilst doctors refuse to put them out of their misery. This is not so. Our medical experts do everything they can to ensure that those in the concluding stages of their lives do so comfortably and with dignity, it happened last Saturday, I have seen it happen time and time again. There is a little ditty which I think sums up what regularly occurs:

Thou shalt not kill; but need'st not strive
Officiously to keep alive.

Aside from the issue of the sanctity of life there is the sense of separating ourselves from each other. The sick and the well, we are all both of those things at different times in our lives. The issue of assisting dying is symptomatic of other issues in our community which threaten to divide. This matter goes to very heart of our common humanity, our identity, that sense, which we are slowly losing, of being so much more than just flesh and blood. Our care of the vulnerable speaks about the nature of our society, it is something many would like to avoid, but for those of us of faith vulnerability is part of being Christ like, dare I say it is something that we need to choose.

During the week a few of us attended a lecture by the renowned British Catholic theologian Fr James Alison. He began his talk close to home by speaking of the divide between the Liberal and Conservative wings of the church. The conservatives he described as wanting to perpetuate a 'stern' Christ. Whereas the liberals would always advocate a 'forgiving' Christ. The truth, as is so often the case, lies somewhere between the two! So Alison used this as the beginning of the Lecture which he titled 'Beyond us and them: contemplation and living with enemies in a globalised world.' He then drew us

into the Biblical world of the vineyard in Matthew's gospel. The tenants of the vineyard rough up the representatives of the owners sent to claim the first fruits and eventually they kill the son of the owner. Alison asked us not to see a clear divide between them and us which a traditional reading of the parable sets up – as does today's parable of the two sons, but to see different ways of thinking, not to see winners and losers but to see ourselves in both sides of the argument. If, for example, we think of ourselves as liberals, by reacting against the conservatives 'the enemy' we are merely allowing them to shape our identity, and if you think of yourself as a conservative, vice versa. Alison wants us to set aside that competitiveness that is so often a part of our lives and which can be seen to be given warrant by a simple reading of scriptures. We need to enter into the parables fully, find ourselves in them, not as one son or the other but as both. This salvation business is not a competition, our salvation is won by being faithful to our true identity and that is not shaped by friends or enemies, our identity is shaped by the God who makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall *on all*.

James Alison made a good point during his lecture about Jesus' rabbinical style. Jesus, he said would have delivered his parables firmly and with conviction, what we might think of as sternly but also with a smile because he realised, he understood the issues that the Pharisees faced, we all have some Pharisee in us! He was not trying to set one group against another, he was looking for a unity of spirit. But that made him vulnerable. This seeing things from another viewpoint, the viewpoint of 'the other' is tough. It would be Jesus' undoing, that is why he died.

The text from Paul this morning writing to his beloved Philippians gives us the key to appreciating the nature of Jesus. It begins with a challenge: Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. We are to be Christlike in that we are called to *choose* a way that will potentially make us vulnerable. Christ choosing to become vulnerable is a gift to humanity one we should share. We cannot foist vulnerability on others, it is not something to be prized or sought, we can't demand it of people or tell the vulnerable they must relish it. But we must model it. We must empty ourselves of the power to protect ourselves from those whose opinions we dislike and from those whose lifestyles we do not share. From those who are bother to us. We must shed the fear of sitting with those whose lives are ebbing away, put away any sense of wanting this over and done with. Being vulnerable alongside others is a gift and a sign of hope. Because ultimately *we are all the same*, we might want to separate ourselves along tribal or political lines, we might see ourselves as the carer not the sickie but in doing so we are putting back up the boundaries that Jesus in his life and ministry sought to dismantle.

Be prepared then to be vulnerable when faced with the enemy, the Liberal or the Conservative! Be prepared to accept vulnerability when we sit and wait with the sick and dying. Because in doing so you are being a Christian, which is your identity. Amen.