

Sermon – March 26TH 2023 – Lent 5 – Year A

I love this time of year. I think Melbourne in Autumn is just a great place to be. There is little wind, beautiful colours, as the leaves gently fall to the earth. It is a season of beautiful browns, greens, yellows and oranges.
Autumn is also a time leading up to Easter in our part of the world. Hot cross buns/easter eggs!!!

But you know there is something a little odd here.

Yes, the weather can be great!

BUT consider this: is it not also a time of dying?!

For example, why are the leaves on the trees changing from beautiful coloured greens to beautiful coloured oranges and yellows and browns?

It is very simple, really. They are dying! In fact, virtually all that grows, slows, at this time of year.

Jumpers and coats and woollen tops begin to appear as warmth and sunshine begin to die on us!

And no more T shirts and shorts!

Perhaps I paint too depressing a picture. But I do also note that people's moods begin to change a bit, especially as the days shorten and dark skies and cold mornings for walking the dogs creep up on us!

Well, in this the 5th Sunday of Lent it certainly is fitting for us to be considering a couple of readings that have a distinctly, sobering themes running through them, namely: DEATH!

Now I am not a joyless, morbid type of character! I love life, I love a good laugh, and I love having a fun time. So, I am not about to dwell too morbidly on the subject of death.

But it is the season of LENT when we contemplate our sin and mortality, MY sinfulness, OUR sinfulness, the Church's sinfulness and the World's sinfulness.

And we need to remember that sin and death in the biblical context are close neighbours!!

Each of the writers of today's readings declare the power of sin over us, symbolically represented by death – dry bones with no life, a dead relative decaying in a tomb, and the Psalmist crying out:

³If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

And, St Paul declaring:

⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God;

Now, death comes to us in many guises.

- Our own physical death
- The physical death of those who we are close to
- Death within ourselves – with all that means!
- Death within the life of the church

- Death of hopes, desires, dreams and health etc.

If we are truly honest with ourselves there is much decay or loss or death around us. And of course, part of that dying is just the way things are. All living things have a life span. All living things grow, age and eventually decay: that is, die! That is life - the natural order.

BUT why, then, is death so difficult for us to think about. In our society why do we so often live in denial around the notion of dying - push it aside – hide it – pretend it is not there - why do we put it in the ‘too hard basket?’

I often use a somewhat challenging book by Rev Simon Stephens. It is called ‘Death comes home.’ It is quite short and tells the story of a ‘normal’ English suburban family, the Robinsons, who lose their 11 year son, Joe, to Leukemia.

The story traces the ‘cover up’ that occurs. It demonstrates how family, friends, neighbours and others suddenly no longer mention Joe or no longer maintain contact (or at least, reduce their contact) with the family.

This isolation further devastates Joe’s family as they try to cope with his death. Stephens suggests that this ‘conspiracy of silence’ is highly damaging for all concerned. He makes the point that when death comes close to us, we are confronted with our own mortality.

Though the book was written 50 years ago, this ‘conspiracy of silence’ around death and dying persists.

Death IS confronting – no doubt about that!

Terrifying – yes!

Fear, powerlessness and vulnerability often mark the course of dying.

Death is not easily accepted by the human species because, while we are able to control most other things in life, we are not able to control this one very well at all – perhaps we can sometimes ‘put it off’ for a time, but in the end, it is death which has the final say. And with that finality, so often, we don’t cope!

HOWEVER, I would also remind you that what is true for all humans is true of the one who we worship here today – that man Jesus!

Yes, he was on about LIFE – Real Life - Life imbued with the Spirit of God – Life centred on love - Yet, he died because he lived only for that life!

He uttered: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!’ as he died on the cross, abandoned to the power of death.

Death is final, merciless, brutal, even for Jesus:

Listen to these words from the Apostles Creed:

‘He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead.’

Jesus like all of us was reduced, as it were to ‘dry bones’, to dust. Death is indeed a part of our living. One that none can dismiss! Not even our Lord!

The burning question then: What can I do about it? What can we do about it?

This is really a question of facing our own powerlessness, our own vulnerability!

It's a question of our brokenness!

It is also a question about our sinfulness, the separation of our living and our dying from God: the source of all life and all love!

This is a question which lies at the heart of what it means to truly live as humans were meant to live. So: in our powerlessness, in the face of sin and death, is there NO WHERE we can go!?!? Is there no hope? Is there only the darkness of death, brokenness and sin!?

Let me state EMPHATICALLY No!

No!

NO!!!!

Even here, in all our big and little deaths, through God, there is still hope!

This is the critical point of both the Old Testament and New Testament stories today.

The Valley of Dry Bones, from Ezekiel, is a vision the prophet has that the people of Israel, dead in exile, will live again on their own land.

AND in the New Testament story of the raising of Lazarus, we have clue after clue, in the text, that point to Jesus' imminent death AS THE MEANS TO NEW ABUNDANT LIFE.

Verse 4 talks about the glorifying (death) of the Son. Verse 16 – Thomas, the disciple declares: “Let's go and die with him”. So much in this text is reminiscent of Gethsemane, Golgotha and Easter: Jesus is deeply moved and troubled; he weeps; the tomb is near Jerusalem; the stone is rolled away from the tomb; and Jesus cries out with a loud voice. One can hardly read this story and not think about Jesus and what awaits him just around the corner.

Surely, surely, at the centre of our faith, this brings to mind for us, that in the worst of our deaths, actual and metaphorical, Jesus dies for US, for his people. And surely, surely in the midst of our dying and deaths we know this Amazing gracious God who rolls away the tomb stone and gifts NEW LIFE to his Son, new life to ALL his people! Now that truly puts real life into the heart of each believer even in their dying! Forgiveness despite our sin! Hope in the face of despair! Surely - Does it not!?

The last word of commentary on this text in Texts For Preaching states:

‘What remains beyond the raising of Lazarus is not only Jesus' death, but his resurrection and his persistent giving of life.’ Last sentence in TFP

Let me finish with these verses from today's readings and a final comment.

St Paul states:

“And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.”

And from St John

‘Jesus said [to Martha] “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies,(repeat) and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”’ John 11:25-26

The gift of God – the grace of God – the gift of abundant life.

An eternity of unconditional forgiveness, unfettered love, abundant life, complete fulfilment!

You’d have to be a sucker not to accept such a gift!

My friends, let us claim this faith as a ‘now’ thing, for all our living, even as we face our sin and death, in all of its guises!

AMEN