

# Homily for People and Parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2024, Easter 7

Readings: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

**1John 5:9-13**

**John 17:6-19**

This week I finished reading a wonderful book called ‘Song of the Sun God’ by Shankari Chandran. The story narrates the life of a Tamil family from Sri Lanka, many of whom escape the civil war and settle in Sydney. I think some of the characters will stay with me for a long time because of the rich complexity of family relationships described over eight decades. This includes the love between parents and their children; the love between grandparents and their grandchildren; the love between those who are married; and the love between siblings.

Of course, family relationships are not the only places in which we find friendship and a sense of belonging. These can also be found by being part of a sports team; through working with others to achieve a common goal; and in meeting each week for worship with others at church.

In today’s reading from John’s Gospel, Jesus is remembered praying that his disciples could have the same love and friendship with each other as he had with God. He prayed, ‘*Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.*’ In this we are reminded of the love that a parent shares with a child, or the close friendship that siblings can share with each other. Jesus knew he belonged to God, and was loved by God, and he wanted these things for his disciples so that they would have a similar sense of belonging and love.

Imagine that! Imagine being part of a congregation or a church in which we had a deep sense of belonging to God, and to the people we meet with. A place and space in which we are known and loved, and in which we know and love others. To a greater or lesser extent we probably have some sense of this already?

In his prayer Jesus acknowledged that the world is a tough place, and that society will sometimes give people of faith a tough time. But, the prayer does not ask for faithful people to withdraw from society. Instead, the prayer asks God for protection and requests that people be made holy through studying ‘the Word’. Not that we seek holiness for its own sake but because it enables us to be faithful and make a difference for good.

Jesus prayed, ‘*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world...*’ Consequently, we can understand ourselves to be a sent people, who share friendship with God and with each other, and who offer friendship wherever we find ourselves.

Before we are overwhelmed by warm fuzzies about love and friendship it's important to ground these words. Luke's Gospel remembers Jesus taking a scroll from the prophet Isaiah and saying that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him to proclaim good news to the poor; proclaim liberty to the captives; healing for the blind; and liberty to all who feel oppressed (Luke 4:18). His deep friendship with God caused him to proclaim Good News to the poor... and, I think, he gives us the same mandate in our own time and context.

Imagine that! Imagine each of us recognising that we are known and loved... and are sent into the world to proclaim good news to the poor; work together for healing and freedom; and help make our street, our congregation, our community, and our society better places.

If you've never been to church, or you haven't been for some years, a church service may feel unsettling. Most of the people present know when to stand and when to sit and what to say and when to move... but if you're new you don't know these things. Some people are not sure if they'll be welcome at church because of the way they look, or the things they've done, or the things they've heard... and yet surely Jesus would want all to feel welcome? Jesus would want all to be invited into friendship with God and with others?

Two years ago when visiting London I went to St Paul's Anglican Church in Covent Garden and in the entrance of the church there was a sign which sought to reassure people that they were welcome. I'd love for you to listen to the words of welcome and here what you think. Perhaps over morning tea we could share what we liked in the statement, and what we found challenging!

For it reads:

*'We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, widowed, straight, gay, confused, well-heeled, or down at heel. We especially welcome wailing babies and excited toddlers.*

*We welcome you whether you can sing like Pavarotti or just growl quietly to yourself. You're welcome here if you're 'just browsing', just woken up or just got out of prison. We don't care if you're more Christian than the Archbishop of Canterbury, or haven't been to church since Christmas ten years ago.*

*We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome keep-fit mums, football dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters.*

*We welcome those who are in recovery or are still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems, are down in the dumps, or don't like 'organised religion'.*

*We offer a welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or are here because granny is visiting and wanted to come to church.*

*We welcome those who are inked, pierced, both, or neither. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down their throat as kids, or got lost and wound up here by mistake. We welcome pilgrims, tourists, seekers, doubters... and you!*

It's not an exhaustive list, and as an Australian I'd want to add a few things, like:

We welcome you if English is your first language or your fifth; if you were born in this country, or were born on the other side of the world. We welcome you if you are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; if you are a migrant, or a refugee. We welcome you if you are well or unwell; tall or short; rich or poor; young or old... You are welcome!

Of course there are some behaviours that are not welcome... and these need to be managed when they are harmful to others. But the bottom line would seem to be that we are to love our neighbour, and be kind to those we share life with; and we do that best when we are deeply grounded in our relationship with God as Jesus was.

We do this in prayer and I ask that you join me as I close in prayer now:

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and your love. Remembering the prayer of Jesus, we ask for a renewing of your Spirit in the hearts and minds of all who follow you. Give us wisdom as we seek your will, and interpret your Word, for the context of our time. We ask this in the name of the one who prayed that we be one, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.