

Homily for people and parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Year B: Easter 6 (Sunday, 5th May 2024)

Readings: Acts 10:44-48

1John 5:1-12

Psalm 98

John 15:9-17

Years ago, I read a book by the Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini called the 'The Kite Runner' and it left a deep impression on me. Since then, I've read two more books by this author so the details of 'The Kite Runner' had become a bit mixed up with the other stories so I downloaded an audio version of the book to listen to while driving. There are many tragic elements to the story which is set largely in Afghanistan before and after Russia invaded; through refugee eyes in America and Pakistan; and then back in Afghanistan when the Taliban ruled much of the country.

The principal character of the story is called Amir, the orphaned son of a wealthy Pashtun businessman, whose constant childhood companion is called Hassan. Hassan and his father, Ali, belong to an ethnic group called Hazara. Pashtuns are one of five Afghani ethnic groups who are Sunni Muslim, while the Hazara are the only ethnic group who are Shia Muslim. A bit like the difference between Catholics and Protestants years ago in which each group belong to the same faith but there are differences of understanding and emphasis that create significant tension. The Sunni Pashtuns have a long history of looking down upon, and persecuting, the Shia Hazara and because of this many Hazara have had to leave Afghanistan in fear of their lives. Some of these have come to Australia on humanitarian visas and now call Australia home.

Even though Hassan is a good friend to Amir, Amir never thinks of him as a friend, but always a servant. Someone who gets his breakfast ready before he goes to school; someone who makes his bed, washes his clothes, and helps keep his garden tidy. Amir can read and write, while Hassan is not able to do these things. If you have not read the book, or seen the film, I highly recommend it because they give significant insight into a culture that has servants.

Jesus lived in a culture – very different to our own – in which servants and slaves were an accepted part of society. So, when Jesus is remembered saying, *"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the*

Master is doing; I have called you friends...” it was not a small thing. Indeed, he was affirming something that challenged the accepted ordering of relationships in his society.

For the early Church, experiencing persecution in the first century, there would have been great comfort in the words – *‘I do not call you servants... I call you friends.’* For a servant is expected to do the right thing because they are paid to do it, but a friend chooses to do the right thing, chooses to be loyal, and chooses to be constant because of love. In friendship there is respect and affection, trust and connection. *‘I do not call you servants... I call you friends.’*

Jesus went on to say, *“You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...”* and if I were to paraphrase this I think it’s like Jesus saying, ‘no matter how bad things are, or how little you think of yourself, you are my friends and you have a part to play in making God’s love known on earth!’

I wonder if this resonates with you – or surprises you? For we are often aware of our limitations as individuals and congregations. We are not as young and energetic as we used to be! We may not have the same financial capacity that we used to have... so, surely God will use others to bring about change and transformation? Surely, God will use others to meet the needs of my neighbour for friendship and care? Use others to share the life-giving hope of faith with younger generations?

But, the Gospel tells us that Jesus calls us his friends, assures us that we’re part of his team, and invites us to abide in his love. Jesus is remembered saying, *“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.”*

That old English word ‘abide’ features strongly in a hymn often sung at funerals: *‘Abide with me; fast falls the eventide; the darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide! When other helpers fail, and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O abide with me.’* But, surely abiding with and in God’s love is more than an end of life hope?

There is no single definition of the word 'abide' for it can be translated as 'remain', 'dwell', and 'journey', and each of these definitions have the potential to increase our understanding of what it might mean to abide in the love of Christ: '**Abide** in my love!' '**Remain** in my love!' '**Dwell**, or live, in my love!' '**Journey** in my love!'

It seems that there is not a piece of our lives that is exempt! We are to be conscious of, and be faithful to, and draw strength from – and simply abide – in God's love wherever we are each day.

Before closing in prayer I'd like share a true story which brings together some of the elements we've been considering.

Some years ago, on a property not far from Taroom, I was being shown a large turkey nest dam just as the sun was setting. In the late afternoon light the grass all around us was clearly full of seed and I asked what type of grass it was. I was told that it was Buffel grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris*), and that it was not a native grass but had come to Australia in the 1870's when Afghan camaleers came to help explore the arid landscapes so different to the European background of many settlers.

The stuffing of the Afghan camel saddles was Buffel grass seed and over the years, as the seed escaped from split seams, Buffel grass established itself very successfully in Australia.

In God's grace I think going to church can be a bit like that! Whether it's through a reading, a homily, a song, or a prayer, something slips out of the 'saddle' and germinates in the soil of our thinking. Something spiritually that helps hold the soil of our lives together, feeds us, and helps us to be a blessing to those we share life with.

May it be so this week, in your life and mine.

Amen