

Sermon for 17.12.17

One of the characteristics of John's gospel is the way it introduces the importance of witnessing or testifying.

In the prologue we read: *There was a man sent by God, his name was John.*

*He came as a witness to testify to the light.*

*He was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.*

John the baptizer was the first one called to witness to Jesus as the light of the world.

He was sent by God, commissioned by God, to be a witness to Jesus as foretold in Isaiah, Jerimiah and Malachi.

Following on after John, there came as witnesses the beloved 12 disciples and then all the disciples of Jesus throughout the ages. You and I are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century camp of witnesses, witnessing to Jesus as the light of the world.

Maybe in our quiet time, we might like to reflect on how we think we are going as his witnesses in this modern era. And if you would like to do this, perhaps a description of the way of witness to Jesus as our saviour and redeemer in the world might be of help.

Hence I share with you now the words of Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche communities for people with disabilities, about witnessing to Jesus. He writes:

*All of us are called to be witnesses and to point towards Jesus, saying,*

*"He is the chosen one of God."*

*He is the one who came to heal our broken hearts,*

*To give us peace and to lead us further into the truth.*

*Now what this means in real terms, is that those who are witnesses to Jesus do not give out ideas, Ideologies or even doctrines.*

*Witnesses tell how Jesus is transforming their lives and bringing them a new inner freedom, peace and joy.*

*People in our world find hope when they find credible witnesses, men and women with a living faith, bearing witness to the presence of God – more by their lives, their growing compassion and their dynamic love than by their ideas or their words.<sup>1</sup>*

When I was listening on Friday (and in particular in relation to the Christian church), to the final report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses into Child Sexual Abuse - delivered after 57 public hearings that spread over 5 years - I thought and prayed again for the abuse survivors.

I thought of the horrendous acts they regularly endured - in the vulnerability of their tender years, at the hands of the perpetrators, and by the system that stood by, and harboured their offending clergy at all cost.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Vanier: *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*. Paulist Press, New York 2004. p30,31.

I prayed also for the repentance of the perpetrators and thought of them as people who instead of witnessing to Jesus, had witnessed to themselves and their dysfunctional ways.

As people of faith they had behaved as though they had never heard or understood the Christian gospel, and I wondered how on earth we, as a church we can expect the secular world to believe our witness of Jesus as Jean Vanier describes, as the way to love, compassion, acceptance and redemption, when some of our very own have denied any knowledge of it in the brutality of their actions.

Then, as if a fresh breathe from heaven flowed over me, I was reminded of what had happened that same morning when I baptised the young man from Sydney.

Over the past months he and I had been in communication with each other – passing between each other, books about baptism and the Christian faith and also questions and understandings. How he had said to me that morning - how wonderful it was to believe and accept that God was with him in the Holy Spirit even when, and especially when, he laboured in the chaos of his daily job in law enforcement.

How reassured and joyously infilled he said he felt when he left St Matthews after his baptism. There was visibly a spring in his step and in him I saw with great relief that God speaks to our hearts in spite of ourselves.

And with this knowing in my heart I was brought back to this time of Advent and how we keep our eyes keenly on the crib of Jesus awaiting the birth, and the uniqueness of our Christian faith - that it is inscribed for us not only in a text, but in a living human presence in which dwells all the fullness of God and the fullness of our humanity as carriers of divine love. A living human presence that knows our suffering and yearns for justice and righteousness to be in all our lives - at any cost.

Therefore as we go from here today may we go in the spirit that Paul writes about in Thessalonians, the spirit of encouragement.

May we encourage one another and build up each other, as we strive to witness to the one who is coming into the world by living our faith in him each day.

The Lord be with you.