

Message for 24th March 2019 - 3rd Sunday in Lent

(Luke 13: 31 – 35, Isaiah 55: 1-9, 1 Corinthians 10: 1-13, Psalms 63: 1-9)

Today finds us mid-way through the season of Lent. Traditionally Lent is a time of self-reflection; a time to be more intentional in allowing space for God in our lives and hopefully journeying into an ever-deepening relationship with God.

Recent world events, and here I am really thinking about the terrible shootings that have taken place in Christchurch just over a week ago, have certainly caused me to do a lot of reflecting on our world and my small part in it.

New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern spoke about those who died in this senseless killing as people who had chosen to live in New Zealand because they considered it a safe harbour, a place that represented diversity, kindness, and compassion. She went on to say that these values should not be shaken by this terrible act of violence.

I think when something so awful happens in our world, we are all affected. The object of these racist, hate-filled actions is designed to divide and fill people with fear.

Just as Jacinda Ardern spoke of standing together and ensuring that compassion and kindness overcomes hatred and fear of the other, we too must commit to that undertaking. God can take us to this place, but we must play our part. Through prayer and quiet reflection – reflection on external factors and deep self-reflection, God can provide the spiritual nourishment and hope that we all need.

The writer of today's psalm knew what it was like to yearn for spiritual nourishment – to be hungry and thirsty for a relationship which knows God's presence. The psalm writer says:

“My soul thirsts for you
My flesh faints for you
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”

I think it is safe to say that we can all, at different times in our lives, relate to the images that are portrayed. As I reflected on the scripture set down in the lectionary for this Sunday and looked at different commentaries on the scriptures, it occurred to me that there seemed to be a theme of contrast running through the readings: themes of hunger and thirst versus nourishment and flowing water; of coming and going, of hurt and sorrow mixed with constant and abiding love.

Luke's Gospel is, at times, marked by contrast and this is certainly evident in today's passage. Throughout the Gospel, Luke writes of the

Pharisees in conflicting ways – generally not in a very positive light but in this passage, we see the Pharisees portrayed as the ones who go to warn Jesus that Herod wants to have him arrested.

Jesus in turn refers to Herod as a 'fox', preferring to concentrate on his mission; his prophetic role of proclaiming the Kingdom of God and working toward its fulfilment. The mood of the story then softens and we read of Jesus' lament, his sorrow for the people of Jerusalem.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

The story in Luke's Gospel, provides us with an image of Jesus lamenting over the people of Jerusalem and loving them in quite a maternal way - as a mother hen loves her chicks.

A number of years ago, I read a story about a mother hen caught up in a bush fire. After the fire had been brought under control, some of the fire-fighters were working back through the devastation, making sure all the hot spots had been extinguished.

"As they marched across the blackened landscape, a large lump on the trail caught the eye of one of the fire-fighters. As he got closer he noticed it was the charred remains of a large bird. Since birds can so easily fly away from approaching flames, he wondered what had been wrong with this bird that it could not escape. Had it been sick or injured?"

Arriving at the carcass, he decided to kick it off the trail with his boot. As he did so, however, he was startled by a flurry of activity around his feet. Four little chickens flailed in the dust and ash and then scurried away down the hillside.

The bulk of the mother's body had covered them from the searing flames. Though the heat was enough to consume her, it allowed her babies to find safety underneath. In the face of the rising flames, she had stayed with her young. Her dead body and her fleeing chicks told the story well enough—she had given her life to save her young."

Using the analogy of the mother hen, Luke gives us a clear image of pure, unconditional, abiding love. For each one of us, we are given an opportunity to reflect on the way we live our lives and the relationships we have – our relationship with God certainly, but also our relationships

with others, with our family, friends and neighbours. God calls us to love abundantly, loving in the model of Jesus.

As Christians, we are given a model for living differently, living prayerfully, peacefully, compassionately, and generously, with open hearts and hands.

We find echoes of this call in our Old Testament reading for today. Isaiah speaks of God's boundless love for us, inviting us to a banquet.

"Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

We are all invited to a banquet and it is an invitation to new life in all its fullness. To know life in all its fullness means abiding in peace and love with all creation. Today's readings are full of contrast, but I think we can confidently draw on the imagery of a loving, generous, protecting and gathering God. And in these ways, we are called to follow.

I'd like to finish in prayer as we each go forward on the path of our Lenten reflection and self-discovery.

Let us pray,

Generous and loving God,
Help us to love abundantly as co-creators of God's kingdom;
Be with us as we strive to live into all that it means to know life in all its fullness;
Help us to remember and care for those who suffer, our sisters and brothers of all nations and religions,
May we be a people of hope, people who work toward true peace and encourage others to do likewise.
We pray in the name of the one who teaches us to live in peace and love, Jesus Christ. Amen