

**Sermon by the Revd Canon Dr Ray Cleary AM  
for Passion Sunday, the fifth Sunday in Lent 2014**

Over the past few weeks during the season of Lent we have heard and been encouraged to hear a fresh from John's Gospel a series of conversations or discourses, as John reveals throughout them the true identity of Jesus as the Messiah. Each of the stories is no doubt familiar to many of us and yet we can all learn afresh from a re-reading of stories that we are familiar with and know well. I know myself I often have an "ah ha" moment when something not previously heard or seen stands out from the text or provides a different way of thinking or adds to my understanding of the text. This reminds us that scripture is a living account of God's encounters with his people throughout history.

The first story we read set for the second Sunday in Lent was Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus. Nicodemus a respected leader of the Jews and teacher in Israel is challenged by Jesus to embrace a new revealed view of discipleship, and to accept the identity of Jesus as God's emissary and Messiah. Nicodemus is attracted to Jesus but he struggles to accept what Jesus has to say about his own faith, the possessions he has and life style. John's Jesus in this passage confronts Nicodemus to reflect on and review his own faith and life and to recognise true discipleship as living one's life in relationship with God and in the service of others. This involves giving away possessions, putting self-last and giving service to the poor and the outcast.

Nicodemus has a rich tradition behind him but when confronted by Jesus with these expectations he finds the demands are too great and he backs away. Jesus impresses Nicodemus but his heart and mind are in tension. He weighs up the optimism, but the risks and consequences are too high. Nicodemus stays with the status quo. He comes to speak with Jesus in the dark and leaves in the dark. The insider, the one of the household of faith is unable and fails to hear the message.

Nicodemus I hesitate to say is like many Australians I suspect, impressed by Jesus in what he stands for and speaks about but who remain cautious and uncommitted, not always to Jesus but rather to the institution of the Church and often what is seen as dogmatic approaches to many of the life issues that confront us day by day, whether they be those around the sanctity of life, human rights, or the teaching of religion in schools. Often we in the Church appear more interested in maintaining the institution than living the radical call to discipleship. We also find it difficult at times like Nicodemus to give up what we already have. Like Nicodemus for many Australians faith/belief has to be proved by weighing up the physical and scientific evidence and not from an encounter or experience of the touch of the living God. And even then when truth may be seen we still proceed to act differently.

The other evening while watching on SBS the story of tea production in parts of East Africa that showed children as young as 7 and 8 years old employed to pick the tea it stuck me again that even when we know something is not right or just we still have the capacity to turn a blind eye and rationalize our actions. The policy of the Australian government to lock up children of asylum seekers in detention when we

know the long term harm this action does is an example. If we recall it was only a few years ago that Prime Minister Rudd apologized on behalf of the Australian people for the treatment of the Stolen Generation and the Forgotten Australians speaking, at the time at the devastating impact of institutional abuse and that we as a nation should never repeat such policies.

The encounter with Nicodemus in this story is a conversation about the meaning of life and death. Jesus brings to the conversation safety, life vision, hope, security and the principles of Godly living that challenge the principalities and powers of darkness. Expectations that are likely to challenge who we are and what we believe.

The story of Nicodemus sets the context for the next encounter between the woman at the well, an outsider and Samaritan. Throughout a long and challenging conversation set in the middle of the day in the blazing sun the woman and Jesus engage in a rigorous and engaging discussion about water. Jesus engages with the woman and in circumstances frowned upon by polite company, as we say colloquially. She was both a woman and an outsider. Unlike Nicodemus the woman recognises Jesus for who he is and spreads the news among those considered as outsiders. The woman an outsider engages with Jesus in the light and leaves convinced of his claim and identity in the light.

The story of the blind beggar in last week's gospel continues John's purpose to reveal the true identity of Jesus in order that all may believe he is the Son of God and the messiah promised. Here the blind beggar understands and sees to the heart of things while some Pharisees see only appearances and hang on to their traditional views about sin and the Kingdom of God. Following these stories Jesus speaks of the Good Shepherd and the door to the sheepfold. Jesus is the Good Shepherd and he is the way to God. Jesus then travels to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Dedication where controversy arises. Some seek to kill Jesus while others believe.

Today's Gospel account takes place a little time later. Like the previous stories it comes from the dramatic narratives of John. Many of the commentators on this passage speak about it as a play with a number of interlocking parts. In the passage we see the grief of Jesus. He weeps over a loved one. We see the candor or frankness of Martha about the smell and odour of what she expects from a dead body enclosed in the tomb. Yet in the midst of grief and hopes of a miracle Martha's faith remains. Martha laments the death of her brother but remains faithful to God and declares Christ as the Messiah.

This whole narrative is to be understood as a pointer to the days ahead and the resurrection of Jesus that is to come. It is a story of hope and foretells what is to come at Easter While it is a story of the dangerous days ahead for the disciples, travelling with Jesus, it is also a story about God having the last word.

In the passage that follows the account of the raising of Lazarus trouble breaks out. There is not much rejoicing. The religious leaders decide enough is enough. They see Jesus as a Sabbath breaker, a deceiver of people. His healings and teachings pose a threat to their power base. The time has come for this Jesus not just to be

sidelined but eliminated. It sounds like the behavior we would expect today from a drug cartel or other sinister crime syndicate when someone gets too close or has information that will destroy their cozy arrangements with the authorities of the State. Today's Gospel is full of irony. The one who brings Lazarus to life is himself condemned to death.

Today's Gospel asks each of us to review our own life. Do you see yourself as a Lazarus being called to a new way of being, of living. As each of the stories we have heard over the past four Sundays we are being called out from our own darkness. The season of Lent provides us with the time and space to hear a fresh that Jesus offers to bring us all to new life-to die to our old ways and embrace God's dream for the whole of creation. This is a call to live a life of justice, embodying not just family and friends but the other. It is a call to word and action. John's Jesus reaches out to everyone with the promise of life and God's reassurance. It is the recognition and acceptance that while we may at times feel powerlessness, it is God who remains present to reassure and bring new life. As the bones are brought to new life, in our Old Testament lesson, by the God who breathed life into human nostrils at creation, so he will do again if we only allow the voice to be received and accepted. Do we constrain our own liberation by closed minds and fixed attitudes or beliefs, or are we open to the disturbing spirit of God. The choice is ours.

Amen.

Amen