

23 February 2014

During the week we heard about the riot on Manus Island; desperate refugees and asylum seekers living in sometimes sub-human conditions. During the week, a neurosurgeon going to work at the Western Hospital in Footscray was seriously stabbed by an attacker and was lucky to survive. Peace talks in Syria seem to have collapsed and men, women and children continue to suffer in appalling conditions. There have been violent and deadly uprisings in Kiev. Media coverage of increasing violence on our streets highlights the problem but no-one seems to have any solutions. The cowardly one-punch attack is frightening and deadly and always made worse when fuelled by excessive alcohol and drugs. During the week I received a general email about the reconstruction efforts in the Philippines after Typhoon Hayan. Progress is always slow after such disasters and many people are still living in challenging circumstances. We don't have to look very far to see how often people's human dignity is reduced or diminished in some way.

But the readings today paint a different picture; they speak about our dignity before God. We are called to share in the holiness of God. In today's first reading, we are called to rise above the human inclination of hatred or vengeance and embrace the better angels within that lead us to love our neighbour and, in turn, to love God. 'Be holy, for I, the Lord your God am holy.' When you hear that phrase, you think that God is speaking to someone else – perhaps the pope, the archbishop, the parish priest, some saintly missionary working in Africa or India. If we think it is addressed to someone else, then it lets us off the hook. In fact, the reading is addressed to each of us here and those who are not here! God is inviting us to share in his gift of grace and holiness. He is calling us to be what he already is; he is calling us in the daily struggle of life and faith, in the falling down and the rising up again, in the mistakes we make and the forgiveness we receive, to touch and receive the mystery of his grace – each of us, you and me, today and every day. The holiness of God is not some first-rate prize for the exceptional; it is a gift that comes to us in daily life, through prayer, the sacraments and being part of a community of faith.

St Paul pushes this idea much further in the second reading. The Jewish people knew about the significance and the holiness of the Temple. But

St Paul is talking about something quite provocative – ‘Didn’t you realize that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit is living among you?’ That is, through the gift of Baptism we receive a dignity from God, we become a ‘living’ temple in Christ, just as important as the physical building that believers worship in. What Paul is saying is quite radical – holiness is not confined to the building. The holiness of God is found inside our hearts and minds, it is the quality of our discipleship, our relationship as a community of faith, our response to the Gospel call of service and justice.

Now we understand the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel, a new way of holiness, a new way of living, a new way of seeing the world. He calls us to do the direct opposite of what others expect – go the extra mile, to give without counting the cost, to love your enemies, do what justice demands because it isn’t anything exceptional; and ‘be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.’ It’s a mighty challenge given by Jesus and a very high ideal to strive for. But if the challenge is not mighty and the ideals are not high, discipleship simply doesn’t make sense. And in giving our lives in the service of others, we are called to radiate joy to the world because faith transforms our lives. This is what the call to holiness is about.

Yes, the parish church is a holy building and each of us who gather here in prayer shares in that holiness and dignity God gives us. So often in life, we feel that we are searching for God but our story of faith reminds us that God in fact comes in search of us, to share in his holiness of life, to fill us with his grace, to guide our paths with his light, to heal us when we are uncertain, anxious or broken in some way. For all those who are suffering at this time, may the God of holiness, grace and peace fill them with his love.