

## Sermon Ordinary Sunday 6 Year B 2018

It's a conversation we're not very good at having in this country, or most modern western democracies for that matter: what are the values important to us, the values worth fighting for? It seems that any attempt to assert national values is so readily dismissed as either racist or bigoted or elitist. But still, a question worth asking: what do we as 21<sup>st</sup> century Australians value? As the saying goes if you stand for nothing, you'll fall for anything. With the changing face of western culture, and continued terrorist activity across the globe, we ought to be able to say what is important to us, what we value, what *do we* believe is worth standing up for and defending?

Along with the values of democracy, of freedom of speech, the right to assembly and to protest, the right to live without fear of harm or hindrance is the value of *equality*. Indeed, along with *choice*, equality could be seen as the defining value of our age. Now, I have spoken a bit before about some of the problems of the *absolute nature* with which these two values - choice and equality - are invested with in our culture. While I think it is wrong to see equality as an *absolute* value, it is certainly an *important* value and one which is worth cherishing and is worth defending. Because at its heart, the idea of equality speaks of the *inherent dignity and worth* of every human being. It is an inconvenient truth that equality is valued in our culture because of the Christian faith that gave it birth. We all share the same dignity by merit of us all being the children of God, of us all being made in his image.

This inherent dignity is something which shines through in the Gospel, and it is seen in the portion placed before us today. Now, the world of the gospel writer Mark was a deeply *un-equal* world. Of course, there was the usual inequality between rich and poor. But more than that, in the first century Judea *all* the native inhabitants were in effect 'second class citizens.' The only citizens that counted were the Romans. The occupied peoples of Judea did not enjoy the dignity of citizenship. They were in no way equal with their occupying conquerors. And they could never hope to be.

But the faithful Jew was also bound to a religious system that institutionalised in-equality, particularly for reasons of illness. According to the Law, sickness saw you cut-off - unable to participate - in the range of human activities most of us take for granted. The portion from Leviticus in the first reading today spells this out very carefully. If a disease was identified, then the afflicted had to live outside the camp. Remember, this portion of the bible addresses the people of Israel wandering through the desert. They are nomads. In a pre-medical, pre-scientific era, for people with limited sanitation and health care, this made sense: removing the sick from the population stopped the spread of infection. But the pain of isolation, and separation from family and the life of the community was surely the unhappy consequence. It carried with it, too, the weight of public *shame* - having to go out and announce yourself to the world as - '*unclean, unclean.*' To be sick rendered one un-equal.

In the gospel today, though, we see a leper push through these barriers of inequality and exclusion and shame. It is he who makes the daring approach to Jesus showing both his desperation and his belief that Jesus can make him

clean. It is important to note that in the biblical tradition only *God* can make clean. So, this leper recognises in Jesus the presence and power of God. And this is important for us to remember. In fact, it is a profound insight: the man is healed and is restored to life in the community and judged clean, by the gift of God. The dignity that comes from equality comes from God. It is God's gift. It is not something earned by right. And goes to highlight the fundamental philosophical failure of the 'new atheists' and secular humanists: the failure to provide a consistent and universal standard by which equality is bestowed.

Now, in Jesus restoring the leper to the place of dignity and to inclusion once more in the life of family and community, comes at a cost. In touching the leper, Jesus himself risks being rendered unclean. But the healed leper can't keep his mouth shut, everyone gets terribly excited and Jesus is forced to stay '*outside in places where nobody lived.*' This enthusiasm and clamour for Jesus the 'magic man', the 'wonder worker', forces Jesus out to the lonely place to pray. This popularity and enthusiasm is costly for Jesus.

But the ultimate cost Jesus incurs in entering the uncleanness of our world lies not just him losing some peace and quiet. In the shadow of Lent, we recall that the ultimate cost incurred in reaching out and touching our uncleanness comes to a climax in Gethsemane and on the cross. We are not always so willing to regard the costliness of equality. For sure it is something worth fighting for, as the leper himself shows. But for us, equality is normally understood in terms of rights and of self-assertion and the freedom to be just about whatever I want to be. As followers of Jesus we recognise that authentic equality can only be experienced as God's pure gift. Perhaps what is most costly, most difficult for us, is that through the eyes of faith, every human must be treated with equal dignity, to see all people as God sees them. With God as our father we are then, all brothers and sisters.

We do not have look too far to see the fraud of contemporary champions of so-called equality. God may well be expelled from the public sphere and so denied bestowing right and dignity on all people. But it is both foolish and dangerous to allow the state to step into the void. Every dictator and tyrant who appears on the blood-soaked pages of 20<sup>th</sup> century history has at their feet countless millions they deemed unworthy of life, less than equal.

But in our own day and age, the 63 million Indian girls who never saw the light of day, aborted simply because they were the wrong sex. Or the entire jurisdictions from which Downs Syndrome has been eradicated simply for having an added chromosome. Or now in some quarters, the patients with dementia and persons with disability now euthanised - with no choice of their own - for being judged a burden. The infamous quip of George's Orwell's *Animal Farm* rings true, some are indeed 'more equal than others'. Far from making our world a happier and safer place, exiling God has made our world less safe, more unequal, and dangerously so. That we are all children of God, brothers and sisters of the same Father, who calls us to life and bestows upon us an inalienable dignity, is one of the great gifts of faith. And it must be something we proclaim loudly and boldly to a world less and less inclined to hear it. But as Christ reaches out to restore and to heal, so part of *our* mission must be to defend and protect those who are being robbed of life and dignity. Amen.