

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 23 Year C 2019

Last year marked the 25th anniversary of the release of one of the most important films of our generation: Schindler's List. The Steven Spielberg film was based on the novel 'Schindler's Ark' by Australian writer Thomas Keneally. Spielberg considers this film his greatest, most important work. For those who don't know the story or haven't seen the film, it basically tells of how Oskar Schindler, Polish industrialist during World War II, saved his Jewish workers from the horrors of the Nazi 'final solution.' In many ways it is a harrowing film to watch, because we know, in essence, the story to be true. But it seems that new generations are emerging who know nothing of Hitler's evil, the suffering of the Jews, the near extermination of an entire people. It highlights how important it is to continue to tell the story, so that we do not forget. It seems though, we do forget. Europe is now more anti-Semitic - that is, there is more violence and prejudice against Jews - than at any other time since WWII. Startling and frightening.

The power of a film like 'Schindler's List' is not just that it tells us a crucial story from our past. Its power lay in showing us what the human heart is capable of. In the midst of extreme depravity, violence, dehumanisation, still there emerges signs of life and hope and beauty and resilience and courage. Even when the darkness was so overpowering and seemingly victorious, still light shone through. When life is stripped of all its usual support structures - all the usual markers that help tell who we are - what remains?

The story as told by Spielberg highlights the *shrinking lives* for so many Jews. The story traces how businessmen, artists, musicians, craftsmen, professors, and their families - often quite wealthy - experience an *ever-shrinking* existence. From large town houses or apartments to the cramped ghettos where entire families share a single room; after the liquidation of the ghettos to work camps when a cramped room becomes a single case; then as they board the train the cases are taken; then perhaps only a song, a memory, a hope a dream, perhaps a smuggled photograph; and then for 6 million in the gas chamber, stripped and shaved and starving, nothing. All is taken. What those 6 million took with them from their shrunken world we will never know.

For those who survived the trauma, reintegration was no easy task. Many, understandably, lost their faith. Most fled Europe, again understandably, as far away as they could. Despair, anger, understandably, marked the lives of many. But for many too, they went on to build and contribute to their new homes. We can but wonder - at having lost everything, at having everything stripped away: possessions, work, homeland and family - *what was carried with them* to enable them to look to the future with optimism and hope?

The Gospel portion placed before us today can really be understood as a challenge to *intentionally shrink* our lives so that we too can look to the future with optimism and hope. As we have heard elsewhere in this Gospel, Luke again has Jesus warn the crowds about the cost of following him. The demands he makes at this point of *'hating one's father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, and giving up all your possessions* provide the most extreme expression of this theme in the Gospel. We hear that, gulp deeply, shift uncomfortably in your pews, and perhaps think quietly to yourself, *come on Jesus, that really is a bit too much, even for you!!...* Taken in isolation, these saying of Jesus are indeed stark. But they need to be heard in the context of the invitation to the kingdom that immediately precedes what we hear today. Again, it is one of the limitations of the reading of scripture as we observe it in our worship. We sometimes miss the bits that help us make sense of the bite size hunks we normally hear.

What precedes what we hear today is the parable of the Declined Invitations. This parable we know: a great banquet is set and the invitations have gone out. But when the replies come back they are all refusals. No one, it seems, wants to come to the banquet! Conventional attachments hold them back from responding to the invitation. And so the banquet has to be filled with the kind of people who never receive invitations to such occasions: the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame and those who have to be dragged off the roads and the lanes. And so, those who have nothing to which they can be attached receive places in the kingdom. They bring no beauty or dignity or honour to the banquet. But because they think they have nothing to give, they have an emptiness, a capacity that only God can fill.

In the light of that – the super-abundance of God’s generosity - we can return to the gospel we hear today. *In comparison* to the supreme positive good that is on offer in God’s invitation to the banquet, the cost of discipleship finds some proportion. Importantly the language of ‘loving/hating’ reflects an idiom of the time of simply *expressing preference*. If you prefer one thing or even one person over another, you are said to ‘love’ the one and ‘hate’ the other. So, there is no command in the Gospel today to go hating your family members! If you have family issues you can’t use the bible here as your excuse! The strong language used in the Gospel today makes use of exaggeration as a stylistic device. It’s is found throughout the gospels. The Gospel today simply highlights for us that the only way we can proceed in the life of faith is if Christ is our preference above all things; if he is our priority; if all the things and people that surround and fill our lives are put and kept in their proper places. We shrink our lives, we empty our lives, so that we might be filled with God. Rarely will the shrinking of our lives be as dramatic and complete as for those who survived the holocaust. *But a faith that costs us nothing is no faith at all.*

As followers of Jesus we need always to have the end goal in sight. It is only by knowing where we are heading that we can progress with confidence and courage as pilgrims through this barren land. We cannot build a tower unless we have a solid foundation. We would not go to war if not confident of the outcome. So, for us, we cannot hope to be effective and faithful disciples of the Lord Christ if weighed down by all the baggage and attachments that keep us preoccupied and busy and distracted. We can only receive the mystery of God’s love if we do the hard work of clarifying our vision and of setting right priorities.

The Good News of God in Jesus Christ is that the Banquet is laid. The invitations have gone out. Every Eucharist points us towards this, reminds us of this. Every Eucharist is an anticipation of that place at table God has prepared for us for Eternity. Let us accept the invitation. And let us know that the cost of following Jesus is as nothing compared to the life and joy he gives to those who love him. Amen.