

## Homily – Trinity XVI

‘Padre, I’m not too sure I understand what exactly it is that you do, but I know when you don’t do it, so keep doing it!’ The words of my former Commanding Officer, when we were deployed together to Afghanistan. My CO unknowingly gave voice to one of the issues faced as some of us try to maintain a priestly ministry in the ADF. We live of course in a scientific, therapeutic age we are schooled to analyse and diagnose, to seek answers, to ‘do’ things and life in all its beauty and mystery becomes a problem to be solved, rather than a joy to be celebrated. I would have been happier perhaps if the CO had said ‘I don’t know what you are,’ because this is the first question we need to respond to.

One of the joys of partial retirement is the opportunity to read. To read simply for the sake of reading. Not emails, instructions, news bulletins or ad clerums, but poetry and scripture, fine prose and ancient wisdom. I have all too often, in the past read whilst looking for a hook on which to base a sermon, a word to offer as consolation or a thought on which to frame a prayer. No bad things, but quite often such reading is fruitless, and it is no way to approach our sacred scripture.

Today’s first reading is taken from the poetic ‘second Isaiah’ and is a case in point. This is poetry at its finest and is worthy of a slow, careful read. ‘Poetry does nothing’ wrote the poet WH Auden and this is a great truth. Pouring over the scriptures hoping that we might just stumble on a word that resonates, that ‘does something,’ is not the way to allow scripture to speak. The poetry from Isaiah does nothing, but it engages us at another level. What good poetry does is spark our imagination.

The prophets often wrote poetry because theirs is a challenge, a call for an alternative imaginative vision, and it speaks to us... what is your vision? Like any alternative idea it challenges the status quo; it asks what challenges lie in the way of our vision and with whom do you share this vision? The prophet tells us that a vision borne out of a life of faith will be vindicated, which is a comfort. But this is no place to look for answers, we look to prophetic poetry to find questions, to listen carefully and to allow the scriptures to fire our imaginations.

‘Who do you say that I am?’ We are in the very centre of Mark’s gospel, a pivotal moment, and at the very heart of the gospel lies this question. Peter speaks up ‘you are the Messiah’ you the Christ, the chosen one, the anointed one. Yes, yes! Peter is expressing the hope of them all, the disciples, the crowd gathered around them, the entire nation of Israel; at last, the saviour, the hope of the nations had come. But at this pivotal moment Jesus challenges them to step outside these well-worn categories, and to imagine what this might mean. Jesus in his response to the disciples challenges them, calls them to a renewed vision, to think again about the very nature of life, the things that we cling to; the things to which we give worth. But

first he wants them to think about who they are. 'If any want to become my followers, then let them *deny themselves* and take up their cross and follow me.' What can he mean, what am I being called to deny and what is my cross?

For Peter and the others this is an imaginative leap too far; the question 'who do you say that I am' is not really answered, we are simply left with more questions, and so to answer his own question Jesus takes Peter, James and John to the Mount of Transfiguration. In effect Jesus is revealed on the mount as a 'sacrament' of God, *the* sacrament of God, and for many of us in the Catholic tradition this is crucial because it is in the idea of sacramentalism that we exercise our imaginations, that we glimpse truth; as one writer put it 'Religion... is imagination before it's anything else.'

Our religious faith expressed in this wonderful sacramental tradition requires of us to take an imaginative leap. It requires of us to ask questions – who are we, how do we see each other; how do we view the created order? What kind of vision do we have and with whom do we share it? What stands in the way of our vision? How do we answer the question Jesus puts *to us...who do you say that I am?* These are questions that are not always readily answered, neither should they be. They are questions which we need to ponder, prayerfully and carefully. They are far too important for us to give glib responses.

Today we are living in a world that is changing more quickly than many of us have ever known. Economic, environmental, societal and geopolitical foundations are being shaken; many are seeking answers. What of us? To begin we need to keep before us a question: who do you say that I am? This question needs to lead us into a renewed vision of God, ourselves, each other and the creation, the sacramental life demands this of us.

St James calls us to works, to action; action born out of faith. Faith born out of a sacramental vision. One which asks the question who do you say that I am, when we kneel hands outstretched at the altar rail, when we see poverty and homelessness in our parish, when we see injustice in our nation, war and terror in our world and when we see the degradation of our environment.

The question defies a simple answer, but it impels us to imaginative action. Well might some folk echoing my commanding officer say I don't understand what you do. But I also hope that many might also wonder who we are. Because it is by being who we truly are that we can make a difference.

When we ponder our scriptures let us not look simply for answers but for questions. As one young Palestinian woman said: the answer is Jesus, but Jesus is a very long word, you can never get to the end of it. Amen.