

Pastoral Letter Summer 2020

Dear Friends

Last week we observed the feast of the birth of John, who later became known as The Baptist. It has also been a time set-aside to consider the plight of millions of refugees and migrants across the world during the pandemic. In that light I would like to reflect upon the Gospel story celebrating this feast.

St Luke relates the story of two people, Elizabeth and Zechariah, John's parents. They were both from a respectable lineage; descendants of Aaron. They were faithful to God and carried out their temple duties with holiness. However, Elizabeth was elderly and had no children. At that time this would have been considered a curse upon her and the couple would have undoubtedly experienced social distancing.

Being childless would have been a personal grief to Elizabeth. But God transformed all that. Her reputation as a woman who was barren changed to one who had a miraculous birth in old age. God's mercy was demonstrated in removing her social stigma.

So their child John became the link between the prophets of the Old Testament and first in a long line of witnesses to Jesus. The central point of this story is to share the emotional and social wilderness experienced by Elizabeth and Zechariah and how God saved them through the birth of a son. In time he would prepare the way for the Messiah.

The wilderness experience of Elizabeth and Zechariah also stands firmly in the encounter of their Jewish ancestors, who were migrants and exiles for a long period in history. The nation had been taken as slaves, wandering around as refugees, dehumanised, exploited, made vulnerable, voiceless and marginalised at the hands of others.

The experience of migrants in today's world is not very different to the Biblical encounter. "We need a mass cleansing, street by street, piazza by piazza, neighbourhood by neighbourhood. We need to purify our streets". This xenophobic and racist statement made by Matteo Salvini, recent Deputy Prime Minister of Italy, is a trend all too prevalent in the world today.

Like Elizabeth and Zechariah, refugees, migrants and 'outsiders' go through similar journeys of wilderness confined not only to those fleeing their homes as a result of war, conflict and famine. Many suffer the same experience in our communities through sexism, homophobia, racism, bigotry and xenophobia.

So, where is God in all this? How is God calling us to flourish as a loving community?

The story of Elizabeth and Zechariah serves to remind everyone that we are deeply loved no matter who we are. The Prophets, Elizabeth, Zechariah and John the Baptist call us to reimagine an alternative life that offers hope, comfort and acceptance to those shamefully treated. We cannot be silent in the face of injustice as a result of our inflexibility, indifference or self-righteousness. Standing in the tradition of John the Baptist, let us speak up like prophets and urge our churches, schools and other institutions to stand up for the unconditional love of all. Jesus gave one simple commandment. 'Love one another as I have loved you'.

As the academic year comes to a close my prayer is that over the past weeks we may have rediscovered the essential values of community, caring for those in need and living more sustainably and responsibly on this earth.

With my love, prayers and blessing for a safe and happy summer holiday

Father Andrew Hutchinson