

## Homily 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017

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Today's Gospel and readings continue to define the characteristics of a follower of Christ.

In last week's Gospel we read Mathew's Beatitudes. St Gregory of Nyssa likened the Beatitudes to a painter creating an image with each of the eight beatitudes contributing a component of the image. A "self-portrait of Christ". Thus for us creatures made in the image of God, Christ through the beatitudes is providing humanity with a portrait of what we should be. The image painted by the Beatitudes may be confronting and unattainable or the finest statement of the highest morality that humankind has known. What both Mathew and Isaiah are saying in today's reading is we must be Christlike. The Beatitudes are what we aim for. We are called to be Christlike but we are also human. Our humanity means we are flawed, if we were perfect there would be no need for Christ, the Messiah. Today's readings focus on the need to take care of the small things, give to the poor and needy, help in charitable works, comfort the sick and let your light shine.

My heroes are not sportspeople or politicians but ordinary women and men who have assumed leadership roles against unimaginable odds and even when they appear to have failed they have had an extraordinary effect on those around them. Some are motivated by the situation they find themselves in, others act out of a deep faith clearly moved by the Holy Spirit. It has become fashionable for politicians to talk of the Pub Test. The Pub Test being some mythical measure of how a mythical beer drinker in a Pub would measure a particular policy or action. Well I have the Christ Test it's much simpler: In a given situation I ask: What would Christ do? I use my Christ Test when I look at what ordinary people do in extraordinary situations.

You have probably heard about Eddy Mabo but have you heard about Vincent Lingiari? Maybe you have heard the song "From Little Things Big Things Grow" by Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody or seen the evocative image in the National Portrait Gallery of the then PM Gough Whitlam symbolically pouring soil into Vincent Lingiari's hands. Vincent Lingiari was a Gurindji man who worked as a stockman on Wave Hill Station in the Northern Territory.

Wave Hill Station was owned by a large and powerful British pastoral company Vestey's. Working and living conditions for Aboriginal people were very poor. The wages of Aboriginal workers generally were controlled, taking the form of tea, sugar, flour etc. and not equal to those paid to non-Aboriginal employees. An attempt to introduce equal wages for Aboriginal workers was made in 1965 and failed. In August 1966, Vincent Lingiari led a walk-off of 200 Aboriginal stockmen, house servants, and their families from Wave Hill as a protest against the work and pay conditions. The group walked from Wave Hill some 30K's to Wattle Creek and camped there. While camped at Wattle Creek the Gurindji people were in fact trespassing, even though they were on land that had been traditionally Gurindji land for thousands of years. While the initial walk-off was about wages and living conditions it soon morphed into a land claim. The dispute was settled some nine years later and marked the start of the aboriginal land rights movement. Now we can argue the political rights and wrongs of the aboriginal land rights movement, but you have to acknowledge that its origins were in simple women and men who saw injustice and stood up.

Who would have thought that when a 22 year old nun with the Daughters of Our Lady of Sacred Heart Sr. Anne Gardiner stepped onto Bathurst Island in 1953 that some 64 years later she would still be working with the Tiwi people helping to build community by keeping the indigenous Tiwi culture alive. In the 1950's it would have been impossible to imagine Sr. Anne draped in the Tiwi flag accepting the Senior Australian of the Year from the PM Malcolm Turnbull. Like Vincent, Sr. Anne has had an immense impact on her community but for me her standout achievement is the impact she has had on the Tiwi people's mental health. Not so many years ago the Tiwi Islands had the highest suicide rate in the world. By coming together and finding ways to deal with the tragic problem, Tiwi people found a message of hope that eventually saw the suicide rate drop.

When I was to be ordained as a Deacon the full impact of the Royal Commission on our Church was becoming apparent. Some of my friends asked me: How can you be associated with a Church that has caused so much harm? My answer was simply this, I condemn the actions of those who caused so much suffering but my Church is more than that. I would go on to say I did not

want to proclaim the Gospel in lofty cathedrals but live it in the wards of our hospitals. Not sure if my critics understood what I meant but they do understand my actions.

In a world riddled with hate and darkness we are all called to shine a light by showing love and compassion. We are all called to be leaders and our strength as a people of God, lies in the very thing modern secular society seems to rile against, our cultural diversity. As Sr. Anne said in her acceptance speech: “As persons our identity is in who we are, not what we are. Who we are is made visible through our spoken language and lived culture. There is not only one way to be a leader. There is not only one language through which to express leadership. There is not only one cultural lens through which to view leadership.”

The critical thing is to do something to make your light shine. The question I ask myself is: Does it pass the Christ Test?