

Australia Day, Year A

John tells the story of the first meeting between Jesus and two of the followers of John the Baptist. Encouraged by John they set out after Jesus to find out where he lived. Jesus turns around and asks them (and these are the first words spoken by Jesus in John's Gospel): 'What are you looking for?' (John 1:38). He poses the same question to us as we celebrate Australia Day. What are we looking for? What kind of Australia do we want? How are we going to direct our energy in the public arena in order to help build a country where the citizens can truly find a home, as well as a country that can make its contribution to the harmony of the world community? When I asked myself this question: 'What am I looking for?' I decided to look again at Pope Francis's first Exhortation in which he presents the results of the 2012 Synod of Bishops on the topic of the New Evangelisation. Pope Francis entitled his Exhortation: 'The Joy of the Gospel'. In it he has taken the opportunity to present some key elements of the agenda he has for his Papacy and for the Catholic Church.

In the opening paragraph Pope Francis writes: 'The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and the lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept this offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness.' He is asking us to examine our lives. Our God is incarnate in Jesus. We are branches attached to the vine. Jesus' message was clear: we are all connected; we belong to each other. As followers of Jesus we must have a Catholic (an all-embracing) heart. This impels us, each of us and us as a parish community, to be more than a community of friends who come here to be nourished by God's word and to receive Christ into our hearts in communion. The Pope is challenging us to be a parish that is constantly on the lookout to share our faith and our joy and our community worship and our mission with others.

Do we cherish the freedom we are offered as disciples of Jesus and members of the Church? If we do, we must want others to share this freedom and this joy, for surely we realise that it is meant for everyone, no matter how lost people might be, however sinful. Christ, the Pope assures us, never tires of forgiving (par. 3). He goes on to ask: 'if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives how can we fail to share that love with others?' (par. 8). In today's Second Reading Paul speaks of the gifts that we each have. When Jesus asks us today: 'What are you looking for?' are we wanting to build a country and a Church community in which everyone's gift is welcomed. It was Teilhard de Chardin who wrote back in 1934: 'Some day, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we will harness for God the energies of Love. And then we will have discovered fire'. This is the fire Jesus wanted to cast on the earth. The Pope is calling us as a community to take our part in this New Evangelization. He reminds us of the privilege we have to share the joy we have and to point others to what he calls 'a horizon of beauty and a delicious banquet'. Surely we want to attract others to the life we are privileged to know and live (par. 14). Pope Francis issues a challenge to each of us and to us as a parish. 'Go out to others', he writes, 'seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast' (par. 24).

Importantly, he reminds us of what, following the Vatican Council, he calls the 'hierarchy of truths'. We must concentrate on what he calls the essentials, 'on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing, and at the same time most essential' (par. 35). This is true of what we are to believe, but also of what we are to do (par 36). So often we get caught up on matters which, however important they may be, are nevertheless secondary (par. 34). The Eucharist is at the

heart of our worship, and the Pope reminds us that that 'it is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak' (par 47). He writes: 'I dream of a "missionary option" that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world, rather than for her self-preservation.' Is that what we are looking for as we reflect on Australia Day?

Pope Francis goes on to analyse the challenges facing evangelization in today's world. He speaks of what he calls 'an economy of exclusion' (par. 54), the idolatry of money (par. 55-56); how we are ruled by the financial system (par. 57-58), how inequality spawns violence (par 59-60). He reminds us of the wonderful contribution that the Church makes to the world (par. 76), but stresses 'True faith in the Incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh summoned us to the revolution of tenderness.' Is that what we are looking for? Is that what we are willing to work for?

He reminds us of the social dimension of spreading the Gospel. Our culture is geared to limit religion to the private domain. We cannot let this happen. Our faith embraces every aspect of human living, and is especially concerned with ensuring dignity and opportunity to the poor, to the disadvantaged, to the vulnerable (par. 209). 'Life for all' he writes, 'must have priority over the appropriation of goods by a few' (par. 188). He has this to say regarding politics: 'I ask God to give us more politicians capable of sincere and effective dialogue aimed at healing the deepest roots – and not simply the appearances – of the evils in our world! Politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good ... I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, the lives of the poor! It is vital that government leaders and financial leaders take heed and broaden their horizons, working to ensure that all citizens have dignified work, education and healthcare. Why not turn to God and ask him to inspire their plans? I am firmly convinced that openness to the transcendent can bring about a new political and economic mind set which would help to break down the wall of separation between the economy and the common good of society'(par. 205). Is that what we are looking for from our politicians?

As today's First Reading insists, justice must be at the heart of all we do. True love must insist on justice. As Isaiah says elsewhere: "We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us ... Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled. The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice"(Isaiah 59:11-15).

Pope Francis writes beautifully of the importance of ecumenism: of Christians sharing with each other: 'Ecumenism is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us.' Today Jesus asks each of us and us as a community: 'What are you looking for?' Our Pope offers us some radical suggestions. In conclusion, I will highlight two:

1. What about committing ourselves, as individuals and as a community, to work for justice, to build a country and a church that is missionary: that goes out to others, and that is seen to be welcoming of those the Pope calls 'the outcasts'? Such a commitment

is not just to avoid the shame we are experiencing as Australians today, but because this is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

2.

2. What about committing ourselves as individuals and as a community to build a church that is willing to share with others the joy we experience as Catholic Christians, and is truly ecumenical: a church that seeks out ways of sharing with our fellow Christians in carrying out the mission given us by Jesus; a church that wants to share the Eucharist which is, in the Pope's words: 'a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak'. It is from our communion in the Eucharist that we are sent into the world to carry on Jesus' mission, which, as he himself stated, was to see everyone live and live to the full (John 10:10). 'Everyone'. No one is excluded.