

- Reflections for a Time of Pandemic –
Fifth Sunday of Easter

* Do We Seek Christ in Times of Loneliness? *

We are hearing of surveys which show there has been a rapid increase in loneliness and anxiety in Australian society over the past couple of months. There is the loneliness which comes with a decline in social interaction, but there is also the loneliness which comes when we sense that no one fully understand us, even if we are in the middle of a crowd.

God did not create human beings to be lonely. In the second of the two Creation Narratives which open the Bible, we read that God saw ¹

It is not good that the man should be alone.

Our first parents did not know loneliness while they related with God and each other. However, when they broke their original relationship with God by giving into Satan's temptation to disobey God, their relationship with each other also became subject to tensions. ² Loneliness entered into human history. Being freed gradually from loneliness is part of the experience of Salvation.

Jesus the Way

In today's Gospel, we read of Jesus speaking of himself as the 'way' to salvation. He tells the Apostles ³

I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.

He is the Way because he is the one through whom we experience Salvation.

He is the Truth because he is the Redeemer, the One who promised that 'the truth will set you free. ⁴

He is the Life because he is the Saviour who shares with us his own divine life through Baptism.

¹ Genesis 2:18

² Catechism of the Catholic Church 400

³ John 14:6

⁴ John 8:32

Growing inner peace, one of the Fruits of the Holy Spirit, instead of loneliness is part of the experience of salvation. Salvation can be experienced only by relating personally with Jesus himself.

To make this possible, Jesus is present to us today in a variety of ways, each of which offers us distinctive blessings. Today's Mass focusses upon two of these ways: Christ within us and Christ in parish community life.

The First way: Christ within us

During the Last Supper, Jesus promised that, not only would he be with us, he would be *within us*. With God the Father and the Holy Spirit, he would 'make a home' within us. ⁵

For St Paul, a test of Christian faith is whether or not we relate with the Risen Jesus within. He challenged the Christians at Corinth with a question which each of us needs to ask ourselves ⁶

**Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith, test yourselves.
Do you not recognise that Jesus Christ is in you ... !**

The most basic way to relate with the Risen Jesus within is by *daily conversation*. This conversation needs to be about our *daily lives and concerns*.

And if we share loneliness of heart with him, we will find the pain of loneliness soothed. We will grow in the sense that, even if no one else can understand us, he understands us completely: we are not alone.

The second way: making 'a spiritual home': parish community life

The second reading in today's Mass draws us to a second way that we can experience Christ, and find loneliness eased in our hearts. This is by participating in some way in the life of our parish community.

⁵ John 14:23

⁶ 2 Corinthians 13:5

In the reading, we hear the call to *grow close to Christ*, the ‘Way, the Truth and the Life’, for then we become ‘living stones making a spiritual house’. ⁷ By ‘a spiritual house’, he meant the spiritually bound community he instituted, his Church. But to reflect upon what ‘spiritual house’ means in practical terms, we focus upon our parish as a faith community.

Our parish

Our parish is drawn together spiritually as each of us relates personally with Christ himself. For example, as I grow closer to the Risen Jesus and you do the same, the Risen Jesus through the Holy Spirit draws us closer together spiritually.

In the same way, as the two of us draw closer to the Risen Jesus, and others do the same, the spiritual bonds of the community of the Church – and of our parish community - grow. Increasingly, we appreciate ourselves in practice as described in today’s second reading ⁸

... a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart ...

These are inspiring images, used before the time of Christ to describe people of Israel as God’s people. To appreciate what they mean for us today, we need to apply them to our parish.

Why are we ‘a chosen race’, a ‘people set apart’?

As a parish, Christ is our ‘cornerstone’. ⁹ We are part of his Church as ‘a chosen race’, ‘a consecrated nation’, a ‘people set apart’, because through Baptism, he has shared with each of us

- his divine nature as God ¹⁰
- his life as God ¹¹
- his mission to the world. ¹²

Our second reading tells us that we can become closer to Christ by growing as ¹³

⁷ 1 Peter 2:5

⁸ 1 Peter 2:9

⁹ 1 Peter 2:6

¹⁰ 2 Peter 1:4

¹¹ Eg John 10:10

¹² John 20:21

... the holy priesthood that offers the spiritual sacrifices which Jesus Christ has made acceptable to God ...

But what is meant here by ‘priesthood’? Last week, after all, we reflected upon ordained priests in our parishes as we reflected upon Christ, the Good Shepherd.

The word ‘priesthood’ has a different meaning here. To understand it, we need to go back to when God instituted the priesthood of the Jewish faith.

God instituted the Old Testament as priests as mediators

To appreciate what it means to say that all the baptised are ‘the holy priesthood’ and ‘a royal priesthood’, we need to remember

- that Moses, at God’s command, established a priesthood as part of God’s covenant at Mount Sinai, along with the Ten Commandments
- that the role of these priests was to gather people to worship and to serve as mediators between God and the people. This included offering sacrifices to God on behalf of the people ¹⁴
- that these priests were limited in their capacity to mediate because they were subject to human sinfulness ¹⁵
- that God promised a Messiah who would be the priest who would represent God to people and people to God perfectly. ¹⁶

Jesus is the perfect Mediator and Priest

This promise was fulfilled by the coming of Jesus. As Son of God and Son of man, divine and human, he is the perfect Mediator between God and the human race.

We can share in his role as Mediator, therefore, because, as we have said, Jesus has shared with us his divine nature ¹⁷ and his divine life ¹⁸ through Baptism.

¹³ 1 Peter 2:5

¹⁴ Eg Exodus 29: 7, 38-42; Leviticus 23:11,20

¹⁵ Eg Jeremiah 2:26-28; 23:11

¹⁶ Zachariah 3-4

¹⁷ 2 Peter 1:4

¹⁸ John 10:10

Therefore as Jesus is human by nature, so are we; and as Jesus is divine by nature, we too are divine¹⁹ – though by adoption. We share in the priesthood of Jesus because we share in his divinity and he shares in our humanity.

We can share in his mediation between God and the human race.

Jesus as Priest offered himself as the perfect sacrifice

As part of their imperfect mediation, Old Testament priests offered animals as sacrifices to God. Through sacrifices, the victims offered symbolised the lives of those on whose behalf the offering was being made.

Jesus, on the other hand, did not offer a mere symbol of his life for sacrifice. He actually offered his whole life on behalf of the human race, ultimately dying on a cross. He was *both* priest and victim, for he said²⁰

For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The Risen Jesus today continues to offer himself to God the Father in every Mass. The Mass, after all, in the prayer of Jesus, the perfect Priest, in which we can participate.

We can share in Christ's priestly role individually

The sacrifice of Jesus was to do his Father's will every moment of his life, and, ultimately, to reveal his love for humanity by his death on the cross. As he explained to his followers²¹

... I have come down from heaven to do, not my own will, but the will of him who sent me.

As everything Jesus did in his life related to doing his Father's will – so our 'spiritual sacrifices' are related to seeking to do everything in our lives as God wills. We begin our days with this intention when we pray our Morning Offering.

At the most basic level, this means striving to live the teachings of Jesus and the Ten Commandments each day as Jesus taught them.²² This includes²³

¹⁹ Catechesis of the Catholic Church 460

²⁰ Mark 10:45

²¹ John 6:38

... all our works, prayers and apostolic undertakings (or efforts to lead others to Christ) family and married life, daily work and relaxation of mind and body ...

Of special importance are our sufferings. These may be physical or psychological (such as anxiety, loneliness, grief or depression). Or they may be the results of hardships of life (such as financial struggles, unemployment, marriage difficulties or problems as a result of a drug addicted family member or friend).

The Eucharist

The most important way that we can share personally in Christ's priestly role is by offering our lives as he offers himself to God the Father in the Eucharist.

The actual Prayer of Offering is prayed immediately after the Consecration in each Mass.

We can share in Christ's priestly role in our parish

At the parish level, we can share in Christ's priestly role by serving in liturgical roles as well. These include musicians, readers, servers, acolytes, church cleaners and flower arrangements.

As we offer our lives as spiritual sacrifices, in union with the Risen Jesus, we are drawn closer to him – the one who can soothe our loneliness.

Other roles

Jesus offered also his whole life to his and our Father by fulfilling his mission to the world as Messiah. This included fulfilling his roles as Prophet and King.

Sharing in Christ's role as prophet

Jesus fulfilled his role as prophet, first by calling people into relationship with God through himself. He taught that ²⁴

No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know the Father also.

²² Eg Matthew 5:20-48

²³ Vatican II: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church 34

²⁴ John 14:

Second, he fulfilled this role also by proclaiming his teachings.

We can share in Christ's prophetic role individually

We share in Jesus' prophetic role every time that we proclaim him to others in our lives, encouraging them to enter into personal relationship with God through him.

Second, we share in Jesus' prophetic role every time we share his teachings with others in our lives by our example and our words in daily life.

But proclaiming the Risen Jesus himself as the first priority and calling people to begin relating with him by entering into conversation with him about their lives is the first way to share in his prophetic role.

We can share in Christ prophetic role in our parish

We can share in his role too at parish level if we participate in ministries which proclaim the Risen Jesus and also his teachings. These include

- the parish religious education programme for children who do not attend Catholic school
- the preparation of adults who seek full initiation into the church and
- adult faith education programmes.

As we share in Jesus prophetic role, he draws us closer. If we do so by playing roles in parish ministries, he draws us closer to others in our parish.

Sharing in Christ's role as king

Jesus revealed the kingdom of God by his miracles and his teachings. He revealed that all can draw upon the divine power of the kingdom through him.

We can share in Christ's role as king individually

We can share in his role as king, first by drawing on his power to conquer all in our lives that is not part of God's original creation. This can include

- experiences which affect our ability to live as Jesus called – such as life hurts we find hard to forgive and personal confusion
- human weaknesses, such as selfishness, jealousies and greed
- crippling habits, such as gossip and other vices, and attitudes such as racism and negativity
- dominating emotions, which can take over our lives at times such as a quick temper
- temptations to disobey God’s laws, not only by behaviour others can see, but also in our hearts as Jesus warned against.

We can share in Christ’s role as king in our parish

We can share in the kingly role of the Risen Jesus by joining with others, especially fellow parishioners, to promote in our local community and wider society

- trends and activities which reflect values of the Gospel, especially love, compassion, forgiveness and social justice
- initiatives which challenge what is contrary to the Gospel, such as lack of respect for people’s dignity and rights.

We can do these things by organising together to form committees or special groups; by organising petitions and writing to decision-makers’; by using social media.

Finally, we can share in kingly role of the Risen Jesus by playing roles on parish bodies such as the Parish Pastoral Council or Finance Committee as well as organisations such as the Catholic Women’s League and the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Again, as we seek the power of the kingdom for our lives and as we participate in parish ministries related to proclaiming the kingdom, the Risen Jesus, through the Spirit, draws us closer to himself and others in our parish community. If we are troubled by loneliness, we will find this replaced by peace.

The Baptism ritual

When we received Baptism, the celebrant anointed us with the oil of Chrism, saying

As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet and King, so may you live always as a member of his Body, sharing everlasting life.

As we do so, we draw closer to the Risen Jesus and experience him as ‘the Way, the Truth and the Life’.

Conversation with Christ

Let us pause now to converse with our Risen Lord in our hearts, thanking him for the various ways he is present to us.

Let us pray too for the faith to respond to him as the ‘Way, the Truth, and the Life’ by offering our lives as ‘spiritual sacrifices’ to God the Father.

Bishop Gerard Holohan

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