

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

\* Would our parishioners be arrested? \*

In 250 AD, the Roman Emperor Decius instituted a persecution which caused considerable suffering to Christians. They were given the choice between worshipping Roman gods and suffering and death if they refused. Those who worshipped the gods were given a certificate called a *libellus*.

Roman soldiers would go into towns and villages incognito to spy out those whose behaviour reflected love, especially for the sick, the poor and others in need. Suspect Christians were arrested and then taken to worship Roman gods.

***A question we need to ask ourselves***

I often ask myself whether, if the soldiers came to Bunbury, ‘Would I be arrested as a suspect Christian?’ ‘Would my behaviour arouse suspicion or would I be seen as blending too much into today’s society?’

The early Christians were noticed *as communities* within local villages, towns and cities. The broader question to be asked, therefore, is ‘Would the members of my parish community be elected?’

***Our values can conflict with those of society***

It is a question we all need to ask ourselves. There is much in today’s Australian society which is a contradiction to the Gospel.

Some years ago I was asked by a journalist whether I was visiting a well publicised criminal in goal. When I said that I was, the journalist said that people would turn against me if he publicised my visits to someone loathed by so many.

I told him that Catholics follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, and so did not accept societal values which allowed vengeance rather than forgiveness, rejection rather than mercy and hard heartedness rather than compassion.

I told him that he should publish as he saw fit. This is a simple example of the clash between the Gospel and current values. (And the journalist did not publish the article).

***Other examples***

As Catholics, we stand for the God-given dignity of every person, regardless of social status, wealth, ability, race, sexual orientation or creed.

We defend the lives of all, born or unborn; young or old; able bodied or disabled; well or dying.

We stand for life-long marriage and for family life. We believe in religious freedom, the common good and social justice.

At times, these and other Catholic values lead us into conflict with social trends and views. Some criticise, others question genuinely to understand.

Criticism, ridicule and even rejection are reminders of the words of Jesus <sup>1</sup>

**If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own; but because my choice of you has drawn you out of the world, that is why they world hates you.**

***Jesus empowers those who relate personally with him in ways he taught***

Jesus teaching in today's Gospel is part of his Last Supper overall teaching about the Christian community. He has told the Apostles already that a Christian community would be recognised by their love for one another. <sup>2</sup> In today's Gospel he is leading up to his image of the vine and its branches. <sup>3</sup>

One of the basic themes Jesus is teaching is that the closer we draw to him, the closer he draws us through the Spirit to each other. In this context, we heard Jesus telling us in today's Gospel the criterion for assessing the closeness of our personal relationships with himself <sup>4</sup>

**If you love me you will keep my commandments.**

There are those today who say they 'feel' close to Christ, even though they fail to pray, worship and strive to live as he taught. They say things too such as 'I do not need to go to Mass or I do not need the Church to be close with Jesus'.

Jesus' commandments call for a standard of behaviour which is beyond human effort alone. For example, they call for Christ-like self sacrificing love, not just human love. <sup>5</sup>

Jesus calls us to love our enemies, and, if anyone is persecuting us, to pray for them. <sup>6</sup> Keeping his commandments is proof of a personal relationship with him because

- without the help of his power through the Holy Spirit to rise above our human weaknesses, we will find it impossible at times to live teachings we find difficult
- and, without a personal relationship with him, we cannot experience his power.

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<sup>1</sup> John 15:19

<sup>2</sup> John 13:35

<sup>3</sup> John 15:1-8D

<sup>4</sup> John 14:15

<sup>5</sup> John 15:13

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:44

Just as we keep discovering more about others by relating with them personally, so we keep discovering more about the Risen Jesus by relating with him personally.

We find fulfilled in ourselves Jesus' promise at the end of the Gospel passage today to 'show' (or to 'reveal') himself increasingly to those who keep his commandments <sup>7</sup>

**I shall love him and show myself to him.**

Our parishes too can only grow as faith communities to the extent that parishioners - each one of us - are working at their personal relationships with Jesus, who is Risen.

The Christians of the mid-third century had become a faith community others in their towns and villages could be recognised because each was growing closer to Christ who was empowering them.

### ***How could the Christians risk arrest?***

The Christians in the towns and villages in the time of Decius could have adopted risk free lives by blending into their local societies. They could have stopped keeping Jesus' commandments, and not lived as his commandments called in their daily life situations.

In a Roman empire culture, where the dignity of individuals was not recognised, there was complete indifference to those in need. Christians were noticed because, as communities, they cared for the sick, shared their resources with the poor, looked after orphans, supported the elderly, provided for widows.

There were no pensions, facilities for the frail or any other societal supports. Life was bitter for those without personal or family support.

It was the power of the divine life of Jesus within them that moved the Christians in Decius' time to respond in Christ-like ways to the needs of those around them, despite the risks. This life had grown so strongly within them that they could not stop themselves from loving those in need as Jesus commanded, even though they risked arrest, suffering and death.

Through Baptism, the Risen Jesus had shared with them his own divine life. They nurtured this life and nourished it with the Eucharist.

### ***Our parish***

This leads to the question 'Are our parishioners noticed by others in our town for living Christ's teachings related to those in need?' If Decius' soldiers came incognito, how many of our parishioners would be arrested as suspect Christians?

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<sup>7</sup> John 14:21

In our local community, how would the sick recognise the special love of Christ for them through our parishioners? Or those suffering financial hardship? Or older people living on their own?

How would teenagers recognise the special love Christ has for them through our parishioners? <sup>8</sup> Or parents? Or those whose children are receiving Baptism or those who are preparing for marriage?

How would those grieving because a loved one has died recognise the consolation of Christ through our parishioners? Or those whose marriage have not worked out? Or single parents?

How would migrants and new residents in town recognise Christ's care through our parishioners?

Many parishes have organisations and ministries in these areas. The St Vincent de Paul Society is a prime example.

But Christ's call is to each individual – we do not respond by thinking 'Our parish has a group taking care of that area.'

Every Christian is called to care for those in need they come across, recognising that what they can do will be different for those with children from those who have not; those who are working from those who are not; those who are able bodied and well from those who are not.

Those who are suffering are called too to do what they can by praying and offering their sufferings to God for those in need.

### ***Give reasons for our behaviour***

The more we strive to live Jesus' commandments in our town, the more we would risk being arrested by Decius' soldiers if they came incognito into our town. But, as we strive to live Jesus' commandments related to those in need, others notice.

Opportunities to share our faith with others arise as they are stirred to ask questions either to understand better, or to ignore or resent us.

In the second reading, we heard of our need to have answers ready for those who would ask questions for any of these reasons. <sup>9</sup>

**... always have your answers ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have.**

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<sup>8</sup> Mark 10:21

<sup>9</sup> 1 Peter 3:15

We need to tell those who ask that we live as we do because we believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the One who

- is Risen
- is present within us
- seeks to empower all who believe in him and receive Baptism to live as he taught.

Christians in the time of Decius were not persecuted because they lived Jesus' teachings just as individuals. It was because they did so as communities.

### *Conversation with Christ*

Let us pause for a moment of quiet conversation with Christ, each asking him to help them to recognise that the closer we draw to him, the closer he will draw us together.

And let us ask him to show us opportunities in our lives to reflect his care for others so that we too would be arrested by Decius' soldiers.

### **Bishop Gerard Holohan**

15 May 2020

Below is the link to the Mass to be livestreamed on Sunday at 9am  
<https://youtu.be/vi5sAdSdeoA>

And the link of the recording available directly after Mass  
<https://www.facebook.com/BunburyParish/>