

2ND SUNDAY IN ORD TIME YEAR A - JM

Homily 1

I still hold in my memory from one of the TV news bulletins the week after the tsunami the image of food being dropped from a helicopter to a group of survivors below who were struggling one against another in their desperate attempts to get the food. Did they keep struggling, like seagulls fighting for bits of fish from a fisherman's catch? I felt that that effort to give aid was probably counterproductive. It seemed to ignore the dignity of the people to whom it was given. The rescuers went about it the wrong way. \$190m has been raised from the people of Australia to be distributed through a variety of aid organisations: World Vision, Care Australia, the Red Cross. I believe that Caritas Australia has received at least \$4m (not counting what was contributed in churches last Sunday). How can the Church work in this area of human rescue and development so that it does not ignore, or (worse still) destroy, people's human dignity?

I remember listening some years ago to one of our priests who had recently returned from working for five years in South America. Along with a number of priests and religious he had responded to the request of many Third World bishops at Vatican II. Generally they were confronted by a scene of strong Catholic piety and devotion, and fierce poverty, injustice and oppression. Fresh in their ears was the statement of the first Synod of Bishops: *Action for justice is essentially part and parcel of preaching the gospel*. Many of them courageously focussed much of their attention in that area. However, other volunteers from the United States, Canada and Europe, were also working among the poor of South America – but they were professionally trained teachers, nurses, social workers, etc..

Soon the religious realised that those others were doing the same things as themselves but more competently. They began to reflect and to ask: Are we here to be incompetent social workers? or can we contribute something that is special? In consultation with the local laity, they came to the insight that they could show that there were deeper needs in life than health and education, adequate housing and infrastructure. They could show how people could take responsibility for their own lives, and how they could do it together – listening, loving, forgiving. They could

convince others that they, too, could work together respectfully and in harmony – rather than build their own kingdoms – by the way they did it themselves.

They would be what the Church in fact is – as one of the early documents of the Vatican Council outlined clearly: *a living, loving faith community, sent by God to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world*. They would take to heart Jesus' beatitude: *Blessed are the peacemakers*, i.e. the reconcilers, the community-builders. That was at the basis of Isaiah's insight – as we heard in today's first reading. Isaiah saw his contemporaries as indeed God's Chosen People – but they were chosen, so that they could themselves come to know experientially and to introduce to the rest of the world God's love, God's wisdom and God's forgiveness – not as theory read from a book, or message preached from a soapbox, but as visible and tangible in their own lives.

Paul, writing to the little struggling faith community in Corinth, stressed a similar theme. They were indeed *the Church of God in Corinth, the holy people of Jesus Christ, called to take their place among the saints everywhere*. They were called together not for their own comfort, consolation and enjoyment, but that, together with Jesus, the Lamb of God, and sharing in his mission, they might confront the sin of the world and take it away (as John said of Jesus) overcoming it by the power and witness of their own lives.

Here we are today, God's Church in Horsham, *the holy people of Jesus Christ*, called together – as in the vision of Isaiah and of Paul – to experience God's love, wisdom and forgiveness. We live it together, not as individuals (which proves nothing) and we concretely witness to its power by our integrity, our acceptance of responsibility, our care for each other, our stance of mutual acceptance and forgiveness our search for consensus, our sitting lightly with power and our own point of view, Through our witness we confront the divisive, self-focussed, power of sin in our own hearts and in the community at large so that *God's salvation* may, in Isaiah's words, *reach to the ends of the earth*. This is the approach that the Church brings to the complex question of human development.

Homily 2

Jesus had been baptised. He had faced into, and taken on (for the purpose of *taking away*) *the sin of the world*. Our television screens with their nightly news saturate us with *the sin of the world* “writ large” – the same sin that, in less spectacular ways, can be embedded in the politics of local communities and sometimes even families. Sin is not the whole story, of course; but it is what takes out of people’s lives – out of our lives – the fulfilment, the peace, and the joy. The *sin of the world* springs from our radical sense of insecurity and uncertainty that leads, in turn, to fear, to compulsive control, to envy (that compulsive need to have more) and to the bitterness and violence to which they give birth, or to emptiness and consequent frantic busyness or distraction and sometimes quiet despair. Jesus takes it on.

John the Baptist indeed recognised him and referred to him as *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. How on earth can you take away the sin of the world, and still leave people free? The Gospel passage gives a clue, even if a somewhat cryptic one. John saw Jesus as the one who would *baptise with the Holy Spirit*. What does that mean? The Spirit of God is simply the love of God at work in the world. Jesus is prepared to baptise people, that is, to immerse and saturate them in the Holy Spirit, the love of God.

When the Gospel of John went on to describe Jesus’ crucifixion, the author quoted a phrase from the Hebrew Scriptures: *not a bone of his body will be broken*. The phrase originally referred to the Paschal Lamb: the lamb first sacrificed on the occasion of the Hebrew liberation from Egyptian slavery, and then sacrificed annually at each Jewish Passover – just at the hour that Jesus was crucified. Jesus had himself taken on, got caught up in, and, like the Paschal Lamb, by his crucifixion, been made victim of the sin of the world.

But the story did not end there. Jesus who had absorbed the world’s hatred and its cruel violence in the guise of political expediency, national security and sheer power, rose out of death; and his immediate message was not revenge, or even triumph but simply: *Peace be with you*. Wonderful! He had answered the world’s violence – the sin of the world, with calm forgiveness and the gift of peace. He had met evil with love. He had baptised the world with the Holy Spirit, the love of God at large.

Crucifixion and resurrection were one great Liturgy where God, in Jesus, was both priest and victim. What happened in microcosm on a hill outside Jerusalem on a Friday afternoon was an act that symbolised and contained love's answer to violence – that echoed through the whole of humanity and across history.

As we gather today for Eucharist, we are drawn sacramentally into that one great liturgy where, with Jesus, we are both priests and victims. We open ourselves to be immersed ever more deeply into the love of God – the Holy Spirit. We let that love overwhelm our personal sin and the world's sin, as it takes shape in our rather mundane lives. The impact of each further encounter with God's love in every Eucharist can strengthen our true sense of identity; it can speak to our radical insecurity; it can change our fear of other people, and our competition with each other, into profound respect, and a desire to draw close in dialogue, and in mutual compassionate care. Thank God for *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*

Homily 3

Just a couple of days ago, I was talking to a man who said that he wondered if the recent floods in our own country, (as well as the floods, landslides, fires and earthquakes and so on elsewhere), might not be a case of [I forget how he put it exactly – but something like] “the things we do catching up on us”. I don't think he was referring to the effect of our human footprint on the world's finely-balanced ecological systems – because he began to mention some of the imagery of the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse. I didn't have the chance to pursue the matter, but I think he meant that God might at last be punishing our world for all its sinfulness. (The occasional archbishop, or televangelist, has been known to make a similar observation.)

In the Gospel today, John the Baptist referred to Jesus as *the Lamb God who takes away the sin of the world* – the Lamb, sent by God, entrusted by God to take away the sin of the world, not to punish the world or to get even. John didn't explain what he intended by lamb when he referred to Jesus – but he certainly didn't use the image of

lion. There is no “getting even” in God. There is no violence in God – just the determination to save us from our violence.

Did you notice in today’s Second Reading how St Paul prayed that God send *grace and peace* to the Christian community in Corinth; or how we asked God, in the Gathering Prayer of today’s Mass, to *show us the way to peace in the world*?

Back to John the Baptist. He saw Jesus as *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. How did Jesus do it? We would probably answer that by saying: by his death and resurrection. But how did his death and resurrection take away the sin of the world?

God did not put Jesus on the cross. People did. And the particular people who did so acted out the tendencies latent in every human heart. The sin of the world put Jesus on the cross: the fear, the ambition, the need to control, the blindness, the violence, and the unquestioned readiness to carry out orders.

Importantly, Jesus clearly realised what would eventuate. He could have backed off. Perhaps he could have met violence with violence. But with eyes wide open, fully deliberately, he let the sin of the world torture, and then kill, him... And, on the third day, he appeared, risen, to the disciples; and his first words were: *Peace be with you*; and his second words were: *As the Father sent me, I now send you*.

What did he do to the sin of the world? He forgave it. How did he meet the sin, the violence lurking in every human heart? With forgiveness; with stubborn love. And he sends us out to encounter the world’s sin and violence ... and to meet them with forgiveness – not acquiescing in injustice, but forgiving, and, then, seeking practical ways to address the injustice.

What is God’s answer to the petition we made in the Gathering Prayer of today’s Mass, *Show us the way to peace in the world*? Forgiveness! That’s all right for God. I can’t. Sometimes I try. I struggle. It’s hard. In fact, I think it’s impossible – alone. But *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* also said to his disciples on that first Easter evening: *Receive the Holy Spirit*. “Let yourselves be empowered by God, more precisely, by God’s love. Believe God’s love for you.” The

Gospel, the Good News, is that God loves this sin-twisted world, and us sin-twisted people. God loves me; God loves you; and none of us deserve it.

St Paul prayed for the Corinthians, as we do, incidentally, at the start of each Mass: *The grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you* – the grace of God, the grace of Jesus, the graciousness of God, the graciousness of Jesus.

Show us the way to peace in the world? Let God love us; let God forgive us. Then, and only then, when we have opened ourselves to the empowering, transforming and divinizing graciousness of God and of Jesus, meet life, meet people, with forgiveness – only... consistently.

Homily 4

How would you feel if I came down to you there in your pew, poked my finger in your chest, and said to you, “You need to get a firm grip on reality!” You would probably think that I was the one who had lost it – perhaps last week’s heat had got at me, or a bit too much sun.

Get a firm grip on reality! You know ... I think that that is what Jesus meant when he went around Galilee, saying, “*Repent, the Kingdom of God is close at hand!*” To *repent*, radically, means to get a firm grip on reality. Why I do not have a firm grip on reality is because I live in a world, a culture, where most people do not have a firm grip on reality. But the fascinating thing is that we are so sure that we have. What prevents people from getting that firm grip on reality is what John the Baptist in today’s Gospel passage, called *the sin of the world*. Buddhists talk about illusion. Elsewhere, Jesus spoke about blindness.

I gather that, in the United States, everyone has a gun – in order to feel safe in a society where everyone has a gun. Our country spends millions of dollars on Border Protection, and mobilises our brave navy, to protect us from small boatloads of unarmed people fleeing from violence, seeking a peaceful life, and apparently invading us in an unorganized succession of leaky boats. Border Protection. National

Security. Might there be better ways to help make our nation, our world, a safer place, a less violent place, a peaceful place?

On a more personal level, I fill my life with labour-saving, time-saving, devices – and work harder and longer in order to afford them ... and get stressed because I seem to be getting busier and busier ... and there is less time [or no time] really to relax and to give to the family. I fill my life with social media, and keep in contact more and more constantly with more and more people, only to find that my life is somehow more and more empty, and perhaps even more and more lonely; or to find there is more and more opportunity for me to criticise others, or, worse, for others to criticise me. It is easy for me, from my ivory tower, to poke fun at what others take to be deadly serious. But, what am I blind to? What have I got out of focus? What do I see with a jaundiced eye? How does *the sin of the world* blind me?

Is there an antidote? John the Baptist, somewhat optimistically perhaps, said that Jesus was the one who would *take away the sin of the world*. Did he? Could he? Can he? Can he do it alone? Can he do it for us? Or, can he only do it with us? Jesus would, in fact, take away the sin of the world in partnership with us.

John the Baptist said that Jesus would *baptise us with the Holy Spirit*. That is a great image. But forget about a few drops of water on a baby's head. Think more of immersion, total immersion, being plunged into, swept along by ... *the Holy Spirit!* *Holy Spirit* is a sort of code word in our Church culture for the personalised love of God, the unimaginably powerful, creative, unpredictable [perhaps wild], transformative love of God.

Jesus' answer to the world's blindness and meaninglessness, and violence and addiction that flow from them, is to live instead from love, from compassion, from forgiveness, from justice, respecting, listening, observing, reflecting ... and allowing ourselves to be changed, softened and eventually transformed, and finally enabled to see ... and, at last, to get a firm grip on reality.

Homily 5

The New Year can be a sort of doorway time that invites us to look back, and especially to look forward to the possibilities of change. Today's first Reading invites us to take seriously the possibility of extending God's *salvation*, as Isaiah put it, *to the ends of the earth*. Like so many of our Church words, *salvation* can so easily wash over us with no more impact than the cereal we had for breakfast this morning. Still, if *salvation* does not quite electrify us, the state of the world can leave us depressed; and our sense of powerlessness can leave us paralysed. It is precisely the desperate pain of the world that God wishes to save us from.

The problem is that we have effectively pushed the issue of salvation quite off the radar. We think of *salvation* as avoiding hell, an “out of this world” issue that we can ignore for a while yet. We have made it exclusively an individualistic concern at that, ignoring God's reassurance of constant mercy and forgiveness, and fearing ourselves and imagining others, particularly the ones we don't like, as totally bereft of love. But if we listen carefully to today's First Reading, we notice that God does not speak of *salvation* as an individualistic concern. Isaiah, God's *servant*, was directed to speak to the people as a corporate reality, to *the tribes of Jacob*, that is, the former Southern Kingdom, and to *the survivors of Israel*, the former Northern Kingdom. More wonderfully, God wanted Isaiah to be a *light to the nations*, not simply to everyone, but to everyone in their national corporate political and religious reality.

The *salvation* God is concerned about, the immediate issue, has to do with the pain we cause each other, the pain we see every time we watch the TV news. God wants the kind of world we ask for in most of our Prayers of Intercession during Mass. For that better world to eventuate, God cannot wave some kind of magic wand. That kind of world involves radical change on our part. And that is complicated.

Since we have had the new translation of the Mass, we have been saying, *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*. But look closely at today's Gospel. There we heard St John the Baptist saying of Jesus, *Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. The *sin of the world* is something much more mysterious - that John's Gospel went on to explore. It used words like blindness, darkness; and referred to the sort of corporate attitudes, prejudices and instinctive reactions that

communities take as natural, even virtuous, that are generally contagious, and rarely questioned. How could genuine, presumably sincere, religious leaders of the time have so consistently condemned Jesus to death?

We may sometimes notice such blindness in others, but rarely in ourselves. Why do the majority of Australians have little problem with the government's treatment of boat people? Why does ISIS do the barbaric things it does, in the Name of God? It is because of sin - not necessarily individual sins but *the sin of the world*. It is this *sin of the world* that causes so much pain in the world, that God is prepared to tackle. But God needs our cooperation. It is complex. That is why God sent Jesus, to coach us, to alert us, to motivate us, to convince us, to show us a whole new way to think, to live and interact, not as individuals but together, where possible as Church. It demands the radical change he called conversion. The process is gradual; success is incremental. But it is happening. If we open our eyes, we slowly learn to recognise it.

Homily 6

In today's Gospel John called Jesus the "*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*". In the Gloria of the Mass and just before Communion, we pray to the. "*Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*". The Gospel refers to "*sin*" in the singular; the liturgy uses the plural "*sins*". We are familiar with the idea of the "*sins of the world*" - less so with the "*sin of the world*". Yet, depending on how we understand it, the "*sin of the world*" can be terribly destructive.

Remember how Pope Francis, not long after he became Pope, went down to the small island of Lampedusa, just off the south of Italy, and close to the coast of North Africa - the port to where asylum seekers in their thousands made their way to Europe as boat-people, in the vain hope of finding refuge there. Because of the unwillingness of most of the nations in Europe to open their doors to those fleeing war and terrorism, many of them were turned back or interned; while hundreds of others were drowned on their way across the Mediterranean Sea. It was there that Pope Francis made the comment that the modern world has lost the capacity to weep with those who suffer. He deplored the widespread resistance throughout Europe to the heart-rending pleas of the refugees; and pleaded with their leaders to work together selflessly and

cooperatively, motivated by compassion, to seek just and fair solutions to this inexorably escalating world-wide problem.

That general resistance could be one example of the "*sin of the world*". No single person was responsible for the drownings. No single person was responsible for the loss of hope of others and their frequent deaths through suicide. Probably no one thought of confessing their inaction in Confession. Yet, might the over-whelming rejection by the populations of Europe be leading Jesus to say to each of them, "*Whenever you did not do it to the least of my brothers or sisters, you did not do it to me*"? All, though not individually responsible, were collectively complicit, in their own unique ways, and to widely varying degrees, in the "*sin of the world*".

In the harrowing light of the current bushfires, everyone seems to be looking around for something or someone else to blame. Not so many are asking, "How might my priorities, my life-style, have contributed to the gradual warming of the globe? How much might my thinking have affected the attitudes of others? What might I need to change?" We are used to blaming others. We are instinctively reluctant to change ourselves. The attitude is endemic to the adversarial cultural air we breathe. My sense is that this is another example of the "*sin of the world*"?

The actions of any one of us alone might not affect outcomes. But none of us is an isolated individual. We are part of a commonwealth - I influence it and it influences me. What communities do can have a real influence on outcomes. What single nations do might have little effect on global warming. But global warming is a global problem. What single nations do together will have a highly relevant effect on global outcomes. Each nation, then, has the responsibility to work closely with every other nation to reduce global warming. Nations need to agree on the fairest way to work cooperatively according to each one's capacity. All of this is simply the teasing out of Jesus' insistence that loving one's neighbour is the very heart of morality and the key to the gradual extension of the Kingdom of God on earth.

How did/how does Jesus "*take away*" the sin of the world? That is something we might all think about. Our answer could throw light on how we cooperate with him in his redemptive work. He does rely on us!

Homily 7

The short passage from Isaiah in this evening's First Reading put us in touch with the source both of the prophet's message and of the conviction with which he preached it. It was the voice of God present within him, the God he met through one earlier unforgettable experience in the Jewish Temple and later, but less spectacularly, in his regular moments of prayer.

The Second Reading gave us a practical example of the confidence that had increasingly inspired Paul, too. Earlier in his life, Paul had had a mystical experience of Christ as he was on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians who had moved there from Jerusalem for breathing space. In that experience he sensed the Risen Jesus saying to him, *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me."*

As he reflected later on the message he had heard, he concluded that there in that mystical experience the Risen Christ had identified the small Christian community with Himself. The rest of his life would be one constant prayerful coming to terms with the practical consequences of that identification and its application to the everyday situations arising in the lives of Christian communities.

His first mystical experience opened the way to further personal encounters with that Christ whom he came to know and to love ever more deeply. It became the source of his ever-increasing confidence, and his practical insights into the will of God.

In the third of this evening's Readings, John, the writer of the Gospel that bears his name, wrote of the role of another John, John the Baptist, or, as the gospel writer prefers to refer to, as John the Witness. John the Baptist bore witness to a few of his disciples of his privilege to witness a mystical experience happening to Jesus, as he put it: *"I saw the Spirit coming down on [Jesus] from heaven like a dove, and resting on him."* John had himself been previously informed by God, somehow, that *"the man on whom you see the Spirit come down and rest is the one who is going to baptize with the Holy Spirit."* John's earlier experience was confirmed by the later experience of Jesus to which he bore witness. After this experience, Jesus began his Public Life, and became unstoppable.

At our baptism, the priest anointed us on the head with the Oil of Chrism to illustrate to us that, through our baptism we were soaked in the Spirit of God [the creative energy of God's love], identified with Christ [or christened], and equipped as Christian disciples to perform the threefold role of Jesus the priest, the prophet and the king. We have the lives of those three wonderful individuals — Isaiah, Paul and the Baptist to inspire us... At least, in their conviction of the necessity to tune into God through the determined and regular practice of prayer.

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