

TREASURE IN CLAY JARS

A homily given by Fr Brendan Byrnes SJ– Melbourne Scripture Scholar on 25th June 2017

You can be very sure that every priest preparing his sermon in Melbourne this weekend has asked himself whether he should say something about the decision to charge Cardinal Pell, a decision that has dominated the media in recent days and caused such shock and dismay to so many members of the Church.

On the one hand, people may feel that there's enough of it in the media and they'd just like to come to church and hear some word of encouragement from the Scriptures. On the other hand, one feels a certain obligation to address the feelings that so many members of parish communities must be experiencing at this time. And, of course, the paramount concern must always be to acknowledge and respect the feelings and trauma of any who have been victims of sexual abuse.

So I shall say something—though without making any comment on the legal process currently under way or expressing any views on its likely outcome. I know Cardinal Pell. He asked me to give a retreat to his priests and expressed confidence in me as a Scripture scholar. There are matters on which we would disagree but there are also areas of his contribution to the church that I admire. I find this whole development deeply distressing but further than that I do not want to go.

It is, however, a time of public humiliation for the Catholic Church community—a humiliation that has been building up ever since the scandals about child abuse by clergy and other church officials became public over twenty years ago. The image of a heroic Catholic church that sailed unwavering and unsoiled through the centuries, outlasting all that persecution and hostile forces could throw at it, has largely been shattered. The pride in the Church that was drummed into us older members of the faithful in our early years has in many respects given way to shame—and there are doubtless many who have left off practicing the faith as a result.

In past times the Church cultivated that high image of itself because it believed that that was the best way to preserve its credibility, the credibility that it saw as necessary to carry out the primary task which had been given to it by its Lord: to preach the Gospel. But an unfortunate by-product of that image of itself as a sinless institution was the tendency to keep any scandals, especially in the sexual area, closely under wraps, and to defend and uphold the reputation of the Church and its clergy at all costs. Hence offending clergy were moved from place to place rather than being dealt with as justice and the safety of children required—with the devastating results of which we are now so acutely aware.

If that image of the church has been shattered—painful as it has been for all who love the church to accept—that is no bad thing. It is actually a process that began fifty years ago at the Second Vatican Council when the Catholic church accepted, as Protestants had been saying since the Reformation, that the church always stands in need of reform.

Why does the church stand in need of continual reform? Because, while holy because of its union with Christ, our Lord, it is made up of human beings who are prone to weakness and failure as much as to heroism and the wonderful love and generosity shown not only in our canonized saints but in countless millions of the faithful who just 'get on with it', largely unrecognized and unknown.

St Paul has a fine description of what the Church has to offer in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: 2 Cor 4:7... we hold a **treasure**, but in **clay jars**, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

What was the 'treasure' to which Paul was referring? The treasure was the good news of God's love proclaimed in the Gospel that he and his fellow apostles were charged to preach to the world. It was a precious treasure but one that was being carried in the fragile, so easily breakable, vessels of their own humanity.

In similar vein, Pope John Paul the Second once said that the Church's greatest treasure was its knowledge of Jesus Christ. This was the one thing that it and it alone had to preserve and give to the world. So the Church down the ages has always carried this treasure but done so in human vessels that, as we are so painfully aware, can easily shatter and break.

But, for all its current ills, we should remember that the Church does still possess this treasure. And no other institution apart from the Church can present it to the world—for light in the darkness, for comfort and consolation in the face of suffering and death, for hope where there is despair.

What will give the Church the credibility to do so will not be an attempt to preserve that image of unspoilt holiness that, as I said before, has been shattered beyond repair. What will continue to give the Church credibility is its quietly going along the way of service, not merely to its own members but to wider society, at which it has been and continues to be so effective and good.

In a column in yesterday's *Australian* the journalist and TV host Geraldine Doogue put it all very well: ... I remind myself and other Catholics that our church truly represents far more than these stories (i.e. of abuse): 700,000 schoolchildren in the Catholic sector, served by 82,000 staff, 66 hospitals including 19 public hospitals run by church-related entities? The St Vincent de Paul Society is the most extensive volunteer welfare network in the country and the church is the largest welfare provider outside government.

In a more spiritual vein, she went on to add: ... as a source of ongoing consolation and meaning, of searching alongside others not merely alone, the broader Catholic Church simply has no peer.

This is finally perhaps where we can at last bring to bear on it all some words of Jesus in today's Gospel..... Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me; and those who welcome me welcome the One (God the Father) who sent me. If anyone gives so much as a cup of cold water to one of these little ones ..., then I tell you solemnly, they will most certainly not lose their reward.

Ultimately, everything members of the Catholic community—laypeople, religious sisters and brothers, clergy—every thing they do is inspired by that vision: that in serving others they are serving Christ our Lord, who is himself the embodiment of the God we cannot see. That vision is so much part of the 'treasure' we carry in the 'clay vessels' of our humanity.

Whatever may be the outcome of the legal process presently being put in place in connection with Cardinal Pell, a process that he and we will have to live with doubtless for some years, our task is not to lose heart. It is to carry the 'treasure' that we have been given the immense privilege of holding and communicating to the world, our knowledge of Jesus Christ and the good news of God's love and the hope that this brings into the world.