

St Mary's Concord
A Reflection based on the Homily for
24th Sunday of Ordinary Time
12 September 2021

READINGS YEAR B: Isaiah 50:5-9; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus all churches have been closed since 26 June 2021. One Mass is permitted so that it can be live-streamed to the parish YouTube channel and to the parish Facebook page: "St Mary's Parish Church Concord". The following reflection is based on the homily from that Mass.

Twenty years ago, 12 September was a Wednesday. In Sydney we were waking up to the news of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. The first aircraft, American Airlines Flight 11, had been flown into the North Tower of the World Trade Centre at 8.46 am on Tuesday 11 September 2001. That was 10.46 pm our time.

I still remember watching the late news on TV that night when the first news flash happened. Like millions of others around the world, I watched the tragedy unfold in real time. It remains one of those events that are etched in people's memories.

As we mark the 20th anniversary of that attack, we have been presented with a stream of documentaries. Some interview survivors. Others have recreated that day by bringing together video clips taken by individuals who were in New York that morning and watched the events unfold. Some commentators have reflected on the consequences. The headline is "The Day that Changed the World". But how did it change the world?

Certainly, there were global and political consequences: the twenty-year war in Afghanistan and the second war in Iraq are the most obvious examples. The catch-phrase became "The War on Terror" and sadly many innocent people in many places became the victims of that war.

As we have also recalled in recent weeks, the US led invasion of Afghanistan was to remove the Taliban, an extreme Islamic group that protected terrorists. Back in 2001, many in Afghanistan, like the minority Hazara community, had fled persecution by the Taliban and became refugees. Some were so desperate, that they risked a dangerous sea voyage in an attempt to find safety.

On the 26 August 2001, an alert was issued that an Indonesian vessel was adrift 140 kms north of Christmas Island. A Norwegian container ship, the *Tampa*, responded to that call. The Australian government of the day refused to accept those who had been rescued by the *Tampa*. That too happened just 20 years ago.



In a real sense, the events in New York just two weeks later also had an impact on those refugees. The consequences of those events on September 11, or 9/11 as the Americans refer to the date, still echo around the world today.

As we continue to follow Mark's Gospel, we keep hearing about, the coming of the Kingdom of God, about a transformation already taking place. Last Sunday when we read about Jesus restoring the hearing of a man who was deaf (Mark 7:31-37), we saw that Mark's community understood that this was not just a healing miracle. It is about the transformation coming into the world that Jesus is Mark's Gospel calls the Kingdom of God.

Two thousand years later, what are the signs of that transformation. In many ways we can see progress, but human progress is hard to define. Do we measure it in economic terms, by our standard of living? Is it about technology and scientific discoveries?

We have made progress but at a cost: the rich few, including all of us, enjoy the benefits health care and education, while most people who share the world with us still struggle to survive. We also saw two weeks ago on Social Justice Sunday (29 August) that the challenge of climate change can seem so great that we choose to do nothing. So where do we start?

The good storyteller presents the challenge in human dimensions and helps us to see possible solutions through the eyes of people who are just like us. Mark is a storyteller. He wants his community to understand what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus. The key questions Mark puts to them are: Who is Jesus? and What does it mean to follow him?

We have listened today to a critical moment in the story. Jesus has taken his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, the northern most part of the land of Israel and now he begins the journey to Jerusalem.

Having witnessed his Mission in Galilee, when Jesus asked, "Who do people say that I am?", Peter declared: "You are the Messiah". But when Jesus describes what awaits him in Jerusalem, Peter cannot accept it.

The disciples, like all the people of Israel, thought they knew what would happen when the Messiah came. We think we know what human progress looks like and when we hear about the transformation that is to come, we have our own expectations.



Mark tells the story through the eyes of one of his key character, Peter. When Peter tells Jesus that he is wrong, that it is not the way it is supposed to happen, Jesus rebukes him: “Get behind me Satan”.

Mark’s community would have recalled another scene at the beginning of the Gospel. After his Baptism Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Mark said the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. Mark then simply says “There Jesus was tested by Satan” The word “Satan” means the adversary – the opponent.

The encounter is about his Mission. Will he become the People’s Messiah, or will he be faithful to the Father’s Will? Peter wants to reject suffering and so Jesus turns to him, and to all the disciples, and says “If you want to become my followers, this is the cost, know the cost”.

We may struggle to understand what is being asked of us, but we can be sure of one thing – the road ahead will challenge our pre-conceived ideas about progress.

Our ability to remember past events is important but it is even more important that we learn from them. We think that military might can achieve peace, and then we need to start again. We think that technology and science will solve all our problems and then a virus emerges.

In the face of human tragedy, the Gospel reminds us that there is more to life than we can ever begin to understand: “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will save it.”

The Letter of James (our second reading) once again puts the message of the Gospel in very practical terms: if you see someone in need, do something about it.

Every act of care and compassion helps to change the world. And it does that, first and foremost, because it changes us.

Paul Crowley
Parish Priest