

## **HOMILY – INVESTITURE CANBERRA CHAPTER OSL – 2023**

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It may surprise you to know that the origin of the academic discipline associated with statistics, a branch of mathematics had its beginning in what is referred to as the Islamic Golden age between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in the west the first recorded use of statistics dates from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Today of course almost all serious inquiry will to some degree require a statistical analysis of some sort and particularly when it comes to issues that affect the society in which we live.

Thus, in the most recent census conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics there was quite a flurry of commentary around the question of religious affiliation. It is recorded that 93.1% of the population answered the question which was an increase from the previous census by 2%. Christianity remains the major religious belief system at 43.9% but represents a staggering decline when you consider that in 74% of the population identified as Christian in 1991 and has been in freefall ever since. The rise of “no religion” now sits at 38.9% and social commentators have opined that by the next census “no religion” will have overtaken Christianity.

Those of us here who remember growing up in Australia in the 1950’s will remember the restrictions that existed on Sundays – no sport, no shopping, no cinema – it was expected that Sunday as the Lord’s Day would be observed either by going to a place of worship, or if you weren’t religious, you would spend the day with your family. I think it would fair to say that whilst practicing rates have certainly fallen away from previous generations, Australia has never really been an overtly religious country; at least not in the sense in which you would say that the United States is an overtly religious nation.

Whilst the privileged position of Christianity has declined, at least for the so called mainline Christian denominations, there is still a heavy dependence by our society on the Christian churches for the provision of services in health, education, aged care and other social services. Strident secular voices would very like to diminish that significance, and we are now witnessing attempts to coerce Christian institutions to comply with new sets of values and regulations that often are antithetical to the core of Christian belief. Yesterday here in Canberra the Australian Law Reform Commission was to have handed to government its findings on the question of religious freedoms in Australia, but that has now been extended to the end of the year. It will no doubt when published propel a new round debate in the public forum about such institutions, their level of compliance with legal requirements, and whether churches will be free to operate and promote their Christian ethos.

Many Christians leaders are wondering what strategy to pursue in terms of the central mission of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to an indifferent and increasingly hostile society. There is always the tendency to 'circle the wagons' and simply focus on a maintenance mentality with hope of more favourable times in the future. The other option is to embrace progressive agendas and try and reconcile Christian heritage and two thousand years of accumulated doctrine, and reach some sort of *rapprochement* with the world. Both strategies are problematic because they offer simplistic solutions to very complex realities in a world which faces constant technological change and where human beings are increasingly becoming more isolated despite the championing of individual rights and what some see as a new age of freedom.

During this time of transition for those who still adhere to the Christian faith we find ourselves about to bring ten new members into our Order, and commission three new chaplains to pastorally care for the membership in our Commanderies. Whilst the origins of the order are ancient, having been founded in 12<sup>th</sup> century the ideals that we hold and endeavour to give tangible expression to in our service of others has not markedly changed over the centuries.

The ideals of our commitment are expressed principally in three ways:

#### CHARITY

The fundamental purpose of the Order of Saint Lazarus and its members is to help the poor, the sick, the most in need and those who are not able to care for themselves. This is the priority of its members and every effort is made to unite the whole Order for this objective.

#### SPIRITUALITY

Members of the Order of Saint Lazarus work towards Christian unity. As it is the only ecumenical Order in the world, Christian members pray together, work together, act together and share the spirit of the Christian family, which is so important to this mission.

#### TRADITION

The Order of Saint Lazarus is one of the oldest Orders of Christian chivalry. By respecting this heritage, its members adapt the mission to the challenges of the 21st century. It is because of the past that we can build the future. (US website for OSL)

It is somewhat serendipitous that St Francis of Assisi who lived at the time our Order was founded was famously quoted as saying: "Always preach the gospel, and if necessary use words!" And that in essence becomes our strongest and most effective tool in fulfilling the command of Jesus to go out into the world and preach the Good News.

Our three readings at this liturgy express those ideals. When Peter wrote his first letter to the Christian diaspora around the Roman Empire. It is clearly written to those who had embraced faith in Christ through baptism and were now subject to increasing persecution and marginalization. In our passage he exhorts believers to adopt a spirit of humble service in their dealings with others. Being combative and adopting a superior attitude in our dealings with others is not expressive of the Christian faith. With our commitment to charity the disposition to being of humble service should always be paramount. Humility is having a right view of ourselves in relation to God and others, and acting accordingly. It is not, as some people assume, an act of spiritual denigration of self – that is a false and misleading piety. And this acting is manifested by our desire to love as God loves which we find expressed comprehensively in the first letter of St John: “...love is from God, everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” This love is the highest form of love because it is based on self-giving and always putting the needs of others before ourselves. Jesus himself is the *exempla par excellence!*

The healing of the blind man outside of Jericho comes late in the Gospel of Luke and in fact is the last of the healing miracles of Jesus to be recorded in that gospel. But this encounter has more to say as is often the case than appears on the surface. The persistent cry of the beggar is disturbing to the crowd that has gathered, and they try to close him down, which only drives him to shout the louder – his cry is for mercy – an expression that seeks more than just forgiveness. Perhaps this man represents the groaning cry of many who long for liberation from that which oppresses them. God always shows his mercy for those who are suffering through healing, comfort, the alleviation of suffering and caring about those in distress. He acts from compassion. The prevailing view at the time of Jesus which we encounter over and over again in the gospels, and even among the disciples of Jesus, was that physical illness or disability was a punishment from God for some serious transgression. We remember from the healing of the man born blind in John’s Gospel when the disciples asked Jesus: “who sinned, this man or his parents?” But significantly here, are the words of the beggar to Jesus when he requests: “Lord, let me see again.” This would seem to indicate that the man had been previously sighted and had lost it. What had caused his blindness we do not know, but Jesus healing action is a response to faith – it is his faith that has saved him. The implication here is that no one is perpetually lost, and no one even if they have fallen away is beyond the saving power of God.

Dear brothers and sisters in the Order of St Lazarus we are called to be catalysts in the ongoing mission of bringing healing and restoration into the lives of those who are most in need in our various Commanderies. Whilst our mission will continue to present challenges whilst the public face of the Christian faith in Australia seems to fade it is in the actions of individuals bound together in a community which expresses the ideals enshrined at the heart of our Order and its existence which will continue to demonstrate the God’s power is not diminished, nor is it spent and exhausted. We are called to be witnesses to this truth by the very conduct of our lives and by the works of our Order.