

Homily for August 4th – 5th 2018
18th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Parish Treasure

August 4th is the Feast Day of St. Jean Marie Vianney, the Patron Saint of priests. He came of age during the tumultuous decades that followed the French Revolution of 1789. Born in 1786 he was ordained to the priesthood at the age of 29 on August 12, 1815.

For those familiar with the novel and musical “Les Miserables” you can appreciate what a tumultuous era this was politically, socially and spiritually. In 1818 he was appointed the pastor of the Church in Ars, some 270 kilometres south east of Paris, where he stayed until his death in 1858. He served as pastor in this one church for forty years.

When he began his priestly duties, Fr. Vianney realized many were either ignorant or indifferent to Catholicism as a result of the French Revolution. He faithfully catechised the people and spent hours a day in the Confessional. By 1827, he had become so well known as a confessor, that yearly 20,000 people would travel to Ars to make their confession before him. That works out to 57 confessions a day!

In reflecting on the ministry of a parish priest, St Vianney said:

A good shepherd, a pastor after God’s own heart is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a parish and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy”.

Over the past month I have been prayerfully pondering this quote and asking the Lord and the Patron Saint of Priests, what does it mean to be a good shepherd? I have discovered an answer to this question in this Sunday’s Mass readings.

Today the Lord is saying through his word that a good shepherd helps his people to gain perspective by his presence so they can live with purpose.

So this is my prayer.

Jesus may I be a pastor to the people of St. Peter’s that is a parish treasure because my presence will help those entrusted to my care gain a perspective on their lives so as to live with greater purpose.

As I begin my six year term as your pastor, I am privileged to share in this ministerial work with Fr Terry Gubiana, my Parochial Vicar, and Deacon Stephen Robinson, whom I ask you to warmly welcome. As well, Deacon Tom O’Toole will continue to serve among you and on August 25th Troy Nguyen will be ordained to the Transitional Diaconate at 6 PM at St Vincent Liam Parish. Please plan to attend this important Liturgy in the life of St. Peter’s.

I invite you dear brothers to partner closely with me in this ministry so that our people will know that the greatest treasure is not us but them.

That you are a great treasure beloved St. Peter's family is something you can at times forget. This is because we live in a world where we lose sight of God. How hard it is for us to remember that God is truly for us. We therefore need to have the kind of perspective that allows for an inspired optimism because it is easier for us to live with a depleted pessimism,

This struggle between optimism and pessimism is on display in our readings from Exodus and John. In Exodus 16 we hear a very pessimistic perspective articulated:

If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

This pessimism is reiterated in the Gospel where the people ask of Jesus:

What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?

In order to understand how bleak is their perspective it helps to know that in Exodus 15 – the previous chapter - the Lord had delivered the Jewish people from Pharaoh and his army through the miraculous parting of the Red Sea. He had then provided a camp for them at a place called Elim where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees. Now out on the road again they accuse Moses and Aaron of setting them all up for death because they don't know where dinner is coming from. Not only that, their recollection of life back in Egypt is a fantasy. The flesh pots of Egypt. I don't think so. It was the clay pots of Egypt where more demanding work was asked of the Jews – increase the quota of bricks with scant supplies.

Then we have the audacity of the Capernaum Congregation who the day before had been fed a fish supper that would have rivaled *Joey's Only*; however all Jesus had to work with were five barley loaves and two fish. Now they ask, twenty four hours later, what sign are you going to perform so that we may believe in you.

Now I know in my own life I have often struggled with a pessimistic perspective on life. We all know that to live in the world is to experience what Exodus calls the wilderness. In the passage immediately preceding today's Gospel John tells us that the lake had become rough and the Apostles had rowed for four miles through turbulent waters, and then Jesus came walking to them on the water. Part of priestly work is to help people to look at their lives with a perspective that can name the struggle but also challenge the pessimism so it can turn into inspired optimism.

This is related to the second word “presence”. St. John Vianney speaks of the parish priest as a treasure because he is to embody the divine mercy of God. How valuable this is to remember. The sacrament of holy orders allows for the priest to be an embodiment of God's mercy by his presence with Jesus' people. We make Jesus present to you in the sacrament of his body and blood, through the teaching ministry entrusted to us with ordination. We also are to be Jesus' presence to you through the Confessional, spiritual direction and by extending the pastoral care that brings heaven to earth.

I love the poetic language of today's psalm that retells the Mana story this way:

***Yet he commanded the skies above,
and opened the doors of heaven;
24 he rained down on them manna to eat,
and gave them the grain of heaven.***

Jesus, in the Gospel says:

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.

In a world where it is so hard for us to be aware of heaven and its influence here below, the Lord has provided priests who are to daily make heaven real on earth. Priests, supported by the Lord's deacons are to help people understand that there is nothing of lasting value whose origin is from below.

This brings me to the p of purpose. As you know Jesus' presence in your daily lives you can live with a God given purpose so aptly expressed by St. Paul in today's Ephesians passage. Listen again to the Apostle:

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds.

Such is the futility so many experience when we do not have the heavenly perspective where Jesus is made present to us. Apart from Jesus we cannot interpret fully the meaning and purpose of life marked by that pessimistic and complaining spirit depicted in Exodus. Contrast this futility of existence with the purposeful statement that follows:

For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus.

Notice the progression here. As the Ephesians had heard about Jesus they came to understand this teaching so as to discover the truth that is in Jesus and is Jesus. What happens when people live truthfully? We live trusting and confident lives as each day we are learning:

to put away our former way of life, our old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of our minds, 24 and to clothe ourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

What characterizes the former way of life? It's corrupt, deluded by lusts. How about the new self? We are being created in God's likeness to live as God intends us to live. A righteous life is a well ordered life and holiness is associated with spiritual wholeness and health.

Yeh that's what a priest is for. We are a kind of treasure that allows you to discover what a treasure you are. We are ordered to Christ in a special way so that you can be ordered to Christ.

By the grace of Jesus may we all pray St. Peter's will be increasingly a parish treasure where perspective, presence and purpose will draw us all into the heart of His mercy because Jesus is truly here in His Sacraments and in our lives.

I ask your prayers so that:

I will be a good shepherd, a pastor after God's own heart and so mediate to you, with the clergy of St. Peter's the most precious gift of divine mercy".