

HOMILY FOR WYD08 OPENING MASS
AT BARANGAROO – TUESDAY, 15TH JULY

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 23. Gal. 5:16-17, 22-25; Lk. 8:4-15

We all know that Christ Our Lord is often described as the Good Shepherd of today's responsorial psalm. We are told that he leads us near restful waters, revives our flagging spirits, enables us to rest peacefully.

In developing this image on one occasion, Jesus explained that such a shepherd was prepared to leave the ninety-nine sheep to search out the one who was lost.

Few countries today have a shepherd who cares for only 20 or 30 sheep, and in Australia with large farms and huge flocks Our Lord's advice is not very practical. If the lost sheep was valuable and probably healthy, it might make sense to take the time to search for it. More usually it would be left behind or its absence not even noticed.

Jesus was saying that both He and His Father are not like this, because He knows each one of His sheep and like a good father he goes searching for the lost one he loves, particularly if he is sick, or in trouble, or unable to help himself.

Earlier in this Mass I welcomed you all to this World Youth Day week and I repeat that welcome now. But I do not begin with the ninety-nine healthy sheep, those of you already open to the Spirit, perhaps already steady witnesses to faith and love. I begin by welcoming and encouraging anyone, anywhere who regards himself or herself as lost, in deep distress, with hope diminished or even exhausted.

Young or old, woman or man, Christ is still calling those who are suffering to come to him for healing, as he has for two thousand years. The causes of the wounds are quite secondary, whether they be drugs or alcohol, family breakups, the lusts of the flesh, loneliness or a death. Perhaps even the emptiness of success.

Christ's call is to all who are suffering, not just to Catholics or other Christians, but especially to those without religion. Christ is calling you home; to love, healing and community.

Our first reading today was from Ezekiel, with Isaiah and Jeremiah one of the three greatest Jewish prophets. Many parts of Australia are still in drought, so all Australians understand a valley of dry bones and fleshless skeletons. But this grim vision is offered first of all to any and

all of you who are even tempted to say “our hope is gone, we are as good as dead”. This is never true while we can still choose. While there is life there is always the option of hope and with Christian hope come faith and love. Until the end we are always able to choose and act.

This vision of the valley of the dry bones, the most spectacular in the whole of the Bible, was given when the hand of God came upon Ezekiel while the Jews were in captivity in Babylon, probably earlier rather than later in the sixth century B.C. For about 150 years the political fortunes of the Jewish people had been in decline, first of all at the hands of the Assyrians. Later in 587 B.C. came the final catastrophic defeat and their transportation into exile. The Jewish people were in despair, powerless to change their situation.

This is the historical background to Ezekiel’s dramatic vision where the dead were well dead, whitened skeletons as the birds of prey had long finished their ghastly business of stripping off the flesh. It was an immense battlefield of the unburied.

A hesitant and reluctant Ezekiel was urged by God to prophesy to these bones and as he did so the bones rushed together noisily, accompanied by an earthquake. Sinews knitted them together, flesh and then skin clothed the corpses.

Another stage was needed and the breath, or Spirit, came from the four corners of the earth as the bodies came “to life again and stood up on their feet, a great and immense army”.

While we now see this vision as a pre-figuration of the resurrection of the dead, the Jews of Ezekiel’s time did not believe in such a conception of the afterlife. For them the immense resurrected army represented all the Jewish people, those from the northern kingdom taken off to Assyria, those at home and those in Babylon. They were to be reconstituted as a people in their own land and they would know that the one true God alone had done this. And all this came to pass.

Over the centuries we Christians have used this passage liturgically at Easter, especially for the baptism of catechumens on Holy Saturday night and it is, of course, a powerful image of the one true God’s regenerative power for this life and eternity.

Secular wisdom claims that leopards do not change their spots, but we Christians believe in the power of the Spirit to convert and change persons away from evil to good; from fear and uncertainty to faith and hope.

Believers are heartened by Ezekiel's vision, because we know the power of God's forgiveness, the capacity of Christ and the Catholic tradition to cause new life to flourish even in unlikely circumstances.

That same power glimpsed in Ezekiel's vision is offered to us today, to all of us without exception. You young pilgrims can look ahead to the future stretching out before you, so rich in promise. The Gospel parable of the sower and the seed reminds you of the great opportunity you have to embrace your vocation and produce an abundant harvest, a hundredfold crop.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all place this story of the sower at the beginning of their collection of Jesus' parables. It explains some fundamental truths about the challenges of Christian discipleship and lists the alternatives to a fruitful Christian life. Fidelity is not automatic or inevitable.

One detail makes the parable more plausible, because it seems the Jews in Our Lord's time threw the seed on the ground before they ploughed it, so explaining a little better the seed being in unlikely places rather than just in the furrows.

Are we amongst those whose faith has already been snatched away by the devil, as Our Lord explained the image of the birds of the sky gobbling up the seed? No one at this Mass would be in that category. Some might be like the seed on rocky ground which could not put down roots. Those here in this second category are likely to be striving to start again in the spiritual life, or at least examining the possibility of doing so. But most of us are in the third and fourth categories, where the seed has fallen on good soil and is growing and flourishing; or we are in danger of being choked off by the worries of life. All of us, including those who are no longer young, have to pray for wisdom and perseverance.

I have no problem in believing that Our Lord spelt out the meaning of this parable to his closest followers and that he would have been asked by them regularly to do so. But the disciples' enquiries provoked a disconcerting response, when Our Lord divides his listeners into two groups; those to whom the mysteries of the Kingdom are revealed and the rest for whom the parables remain only parables. This second group is described in words from the prophet Isaiah as those who "may see but not perceive, listen but not understand". Probably the background to this is the amazement of Our Lord's disciples at the large number who did not accept his teaching.

Why is this still so? What must we do to be among those for whom the mysteries of the Kingdom are revealed?

The call of the one true God remains mysterious, especially today when many good people find it hard to believe. Even in the time of the prophets many of their hearers remained spiritually deaf and blind, while any number over the ages have admired the beauty of Jesus' teaching, but never been moved to answer his call.

Our task is to be open to the power of the Spirit, to allow the God of surprises to act through us. Human motivation is complex and mysterious, because sometimes very strong Catholics, and other strong Christians, can be prayerful and regularly good, but also very determined not to take even one further step. On the other hand, some followers of Christ can be much less zealous and faithful, but open to development, to change for the better because they realize their unworthiness and their ignorance. Where do you stand?

Whatever our situation we must pray for an openness of heart, for a willingness to take the next step, even if we are fearful of venturing too much further. If we take God's hand, He will do the rest. Trust is the key. God will not fail us.

How can we work to avoid slipping from the last and best category of the fruit bearers into those "who are choked by the worries and riches and pleasures of life" and so do not produce much fruit at all?

The second reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians points us in the correct direction, reminding us all that each person must declare himself in the age-old struggle between good and evil, between what Paul calls the flesh and the Spirit. It is not good enough to be only a passenger, to try to live in "no-mans land" between the warring parties. Life forces us to choose, eventually destroys any possibility of neutrality.

We will bring forth good fruit by learning the language of the Cross and inscribing it on our hearts. The language of the Cross brings us the fruits of the Spirit which Paul lists, enables us to experience peace and joy, to be regularly kind and generous to others. Following Christ is not cost free, not always easy, because it requires struggling against what St. Paul calls "the flesh", our fat relentless egos, old fashioned selfishness. It is always a battle, even for old people like me!

Don't spend your life sitting on the fence, keeping your options open, because only commitments bring fulfilment. Happiness comes from meeting our obligations, doing our duty, especially in small matters and regularly, so we can rise to meet the harder challenges. Many have found their life's calling at World Youth Days.

To be a disciple of Jesus requires discipline, especially self discipline; what Paul calls self control. The practice of self control won't make you perfect (it hasn't with me), but self control is necessary to

develop and protect the love in our hearts and prevent others, especially our family and friends, from being hurt by our lapses into nastiness or laziness.

I pray that through the power of the Spirit all of you will join that immense army of saints, healed and reborn, which was revealed to Ezekiel, which has enriched human history for countless generations and which is rewarded in the after-life of heaven.

Let me conclude by adapting one of the most powerful sermons of St. Augustine, the finest theologian of the first millennium and a bishop in the small North African town of Hippo around 1600 years ago.

I expect that in the next five days of prayer and celebration that your spirits will rise, as mine always does, in the excitement of this World Youth Day. Please God we shall all be glad that we participated, despite the cost, hassles and distances travelled. During this week we have every right to rejoice and celebrate the liberation of our repentance, the rejuvenation of our faith. We are called to open our hearts to the power of the Spirit. And to the young ones I give a gentle reminder that in your enthusiasm and excitement you do not forget to listen and pray!

Many of you have travelled such a long way that you may believe that you have arrived, indeed, at the ends of earth! If so, that's good, for Our Lord told his first apostles that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth. That prophesy has been fulfilled in the witness of many missionaries to this vast southern continent, and it is fulfilled yet again in your presence here.

But these days will pass too quickly and next week we shall return to earth. For a time some of you will find the real world of home and parish, work or study, flat and disappointing.

Soon, too soon, you will all be going away. Briefly we are now here in Sydney at the centre of the Catholic world, but next week the Holy Father will return to Rome, we Sydneysiders will return to our parishes, while you, now visiting pilgrims, will go back to your homes in places near and far.

In other words during next week we shall be parting from one another. But when we part after these happy days, let us never part from our loving God and his Son Jesus Christ. And may Mary, Mother of God, whom we invoke in this World Youth Day as Our Lady of the Southern Cross, strengthen us in this resolution.

And so I pray. Come, come O Breath of God, from the four winds, from all the nations and peoples of the earth and bless our Great South Land of the Holy Spirit.

Empower us also to be another great and immense army of humble servants and faithful witnesses.

And we make this prayer to God our Father in the name of Christ his Son. Amen.
Amen.

+ George Cardinal Pell
Archbishop of Sydney