

**Australian Bishops; *Ad Limina Apostolorum*
Thursday 27 June, 2019**

**Homily
Archbishop Christopher Prowse
St Peter Chanel Chapel
Domus Australia, Rome**

Readings: Genesis 16/1-12, 15-16; Matthew 7/21-29

In this morning's first Reading from Genesis, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, attempt to respond to a major crisis in their marriage which is still common today: that is, infertility.

Without entering into the ethics of Sarah's strategy, and taken with Abraham's somewhat reluctant acceptance, Sarah's Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar, is seconded to bear a child from Abraham.

Once Hagar conceived, huge jealousy and distaste grew in Sarah's heart. Hagar fled.

Hiding near a spring in the desert an angel of the Lord appeared to the gloomy Hagar and asked her a crucial questions: "Where have you come from...and where are you going?"

In the midst of our own seemingly spiritual infertilities in Australia, we bishops too believe the Holy Spirit is asking the Church in Australia the same question, although from a totally different cultural context: "Where have you come from...and where are you going?" What is God doing to the Church in Australia?

When you line up Australians with other nationalities we generally feel we are quiet a pragmatic people – a people who ask "What are you doing?", more than "Who are you...what have you become? A "doing" more than a "being" people.

This is all well and good. We have built Australia into a place with a lifestyle and standard of living that is the envy of the world. "They do things well" people say of us.

Tragically however, serious problems like euthanasia, mental illness, homelessness, the health of our Aboriginal First Peoples, and so on point to a soulless nation in search of meaning and purpose. We don't really know who we want to be.

The Gospel today from Matthew shouts out that those who do not attend to these deeper realities of life are heading for a calamitous future.

Those that do not listen to the conversion call of the kingdom of God are like the stupid who build their houses on sand. The structure cannot withstand the rain, floods and gales of life.

Yet, those who listen and act on the word of God are sensible and will prevail.

So the key to maturity starts with listening and then acting.

As Bishops, and so many of our people so far in the Plenary Council journey, have involved ourselves in much listening in these months – especially for us last week in Ariccia. It has brought us together in deeper bonds of fraternity at most unexpected depths. There has been much “solace in the midst of woe” for us Bishops, as the recent Sequence from Pentecost has expressed for us.

As we met in Ariccia last week an international youth colloquium was taking place in the Vatican. They were considering what impact “Christus Vivit” is having around the world. There were a few youth from Australia there too. They were at our Mass last Sunday in this chapel.

At the end of Christus Vivit there is a section regarding vocation in life. It caught my eye. It was all about true listening. I think it could be easily applied to communal discernment – something we are all involved in at new depths in our Plenary synodal journey at present.

In this document, Pope Francis writes of three types of sensitivities we all need to cultivate as we attempt to listen to the Holy Spirit deep within.

The first sensitivity is to listen to each other's faith stories rather than simply hearing.

The second sensitivity is to attempt to discern what is of God and what is not.

We are doing this already, aren't we?

It was the third sensitivity that is the real challenge. It is to truly listen to the heartbeat of God within. Pope Francis calls this a listening to "what is truly pleasing to the Lord".

Lest all this sounds rather academic, I thought we all witnessed this so subtly just last Monday morning in our unforgettable time with Pope Francis. It was just one simple little thing but it shouted out in my heart when we saw it happen about three times. It was an image that was surely "truly pleasing to the Lord."

It was Pope Francis taking his simple plastic bottle of water and pouring it into not his own glass but the glass of his hardworking translator. It was done so naturally almost unreflexively, be he was "truly listening" and acting to the reality of the present moment. It was a saving gesture coming from a house built on rock/Petrus/Peter by Peter's successor. The Pope was giving us a subtle example of what missionary discipleship and closeness to each other really means. What a beautiful gift of the Holy Spirit he gives us. So simple. So profound. True listening.

This Australian chapel bears the name of the martyr of Oceania, St Peter Chanel (1804 – 1841). This French Marist listened to the Holy Spirit in his heart and left his comfort zones of Europe and participated in the surprisingly late first evangelisation of our part of the world. To a certain degree this was done incompletely and still is a kerygmatic work in its first bloom – in our time – still awaiting a systematic outreach.

But the blood spilled by St Peter Chanel on the Island of Futuna offers us all a fertile soil for us in the future evangelisation of all Oceania including Australia.

May I conclude by offering you all again the miraculous Australian story that we all heard and celebrated in that great watershed moment for our youth apostolate in Australia – World Youth Day, Sydney 2008.

The agent for evangelisation here was unexpected and, like Pope Francis, so simple – it was Margaret Liddy, the recently deceased Aboriginal elder from Melville Island.

There she was with her son fishing at sunset. Once night set in – all the brilliant stars came out. She and her son, sensing something special was happening both looked into the sky. When Margaret told me this personally some years ago, her face became radiant. Clearly, she was recounting to me what she considered, and I am now sure it was, an apparition.

The stars seemed to dance. Her son said to her, “look mum”, as he pointed to a most unusual star formation, “it looks like a dog.” “No son”, replied Margaret, “it is the Holy Spirit”, this image eventually became the symbol of WYD Sydney 2008.

But the important point is this. Margaret listened, discerned and declared what was truly pleasing to the Lord that what they were witnessing was not a dog but the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life.

As too many Australian people now look to the Catholic Church and say “It’s a dog”. We beg to differ with the prophetic leadership of our Aboriginal people we say “No, sons and daughters of Australia, She is the Body of Christ, the community of the Holy Spirit, in all her woundedness and fragility but, like the Southern Cross in our skies, the presence of Christ crucified and risen resplendent in our hearts.”

*“Holy Spirit Lord of Life from the clear celestial height,
Thy pure radiance give.”*

Our Lady of the Southern Cross, Pray for Us. Amen