

10 August 2014

On Wednesday morning I rushed down to Torquay passed Geelong to attend the annual Melbourne clergy assembly. The guest speaker was Luis Antonio Tagle, Cardinal Archbishop of Manila in the Philippines. Cardinal Tagle is an extraordinary person. Plucked from obscurity to lead the biggest diocese in Asia, Cardinal Tagle has a boyish face, dresses like a simple priest and walks around with a back-pack. When he first became a bishop in 2001, he looked so young that the late Pope John Paul II asked if he had made his First Communion!! Cardinal Tagle is a humble, holy man, a gentle pastor, completely untouched by vanity or ambition who feels very deeply the suffering of his people. He has a great commitment to justice and to fighting poverty and oppression in the Philippines and in other parts of the world.

Despite the many challenges that are before him, Cardinal Tagle struck me as a man at peace with himself, his world and his God. He radiates hope, gentleness and peace. These are the classic signs of holiness and sanctity. These are the virtues that are needed when the challenges of life also challenge our faith. In today's Gospel, Peter receives from Jesus great words of comfort, faith and hope: 'Courage, it is I. Do not be afraid'. And with that, Peter launches out to walk on the water and encounter the Lord. But feeling the force of the wind, Peter took fright and began to sink. He took fright and began to sink. That image, that line from the Gospel touches the very human reality in each of our lives, those moments when we have been afraid, lost courage and hope, lost direction in life, felt ourselves inside a deep, dark hole, when our faith was weakened and we felt the absence of God. Peter is each us, sometimes strong in faith, sometimes weak.

And what does Jesus do in the face of this human weakness, this doubt and fear? Does he punish Peter? Does he send him away? No, listen carefully to the words of the Gospel; 'Jesus put out his hand at once and held him'. Jesus held him secure; he held him firmly; he held him in faith. Yes, the weakness of Peter is the focus of today's Gospel but the story is a mirror into which we see reflected our own life story and experience. The Gospel touches those moments in life when we are weak in faith exactly like Peter and the healing hand of God, the grace, the mercy, the peace of Jesus comes to rescue us and to set our hearts free.

It's very easy to speak with joy about the presence of God in our lives when everything is going well and everyone is happy and healthy. But the scriptures often draw us into the raw, human reality and drama when things are not going so well; when there is real doubt, fear, struggle, anxiety and physical, spiritual or psychological pain. Then we come to know the power and love of this great God, the God who comes to us in our weakness, the God who comes to set us free, the God who comes to heal us of all fear, the God who calls light out of darkness. Again Pope Francis reminds us that Christians are in the business of making known the gift of faith, faith which transforms, heals, loves and forgives. This is our 'core business' as Christians because now more than ever, the world is in need of faith, hope and joy.

On Thursday morning St Patrick's Cathedral hosted the national memorial service for the victims of MH 17. Friday was the feast of St Mary MacKillop, a woman of remarkable faith who knew moments of doubt and suffering in her life; but God transformed this human reality into something remarkable for the kingdom. Mary MacKillop's life remains an enduring legacy for the Church in Australia. These moments are opportunities that allow us to touch the mystery of God at work in our lives; like Peter, to be touched by the healing power and grace of Jesus who brings us calm in the midst of life's many storms. As we gather to celebrate the Eucharist as a community of faith, we meet the Lord Jesus who said to Peter in the face of doubt and fear, 'Courage, it is I. Do not be afraid'.