

Date 05/03/2023

Day: The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent Year A

Congregation: St Chad's Linwood

First Reading: Genesis 12: 1-4

Second Reading: Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17

Gospel: John 3: 1-17

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, tells the story of Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, who was archbishop of South Vietnam when the communists took over in 1975. Cardinal Van Thuan was arrested and held for 9 years in solitary confinement. He talked of his experience of those years of torture in solitary confinement, including of how his torturer had come to faith and ended up in prison with him. And he spoke of how, in his underground prison cell he celebrate communion by himself every day, using one grain of rice and a little rice wine (which had been smuggled in) held in the palm of his hand. And as he did this every day he danced with joy at his salvation.

Archbishop Justin used the story as an example of what it means to live out the hope we have in God's salvation, even in the most distressing of circumstances. The hope that we have as primarily citizens of heaven before we are anything else.

In our Lenten study we are looking at the New Testament book of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, who was writing to encourage Christian communities who had become exiles due to hostility to the Christian message.

Christians had fled throughout the known world to escape the persecution they had experienced and Peter wrote to support them and to encourage them to remain strong and vibrant in the faith that had already caused them to leave their home, family, work, and community. – all the things we often count on for encouragement and protection.

There are a number of different types of exile or alienation that people can experience. Cardinal Van Thuan's was exiled from the people he had spiritual responsibility for due to religious persecution from the authorities who feared his influence. Others may be exiled from family or friends; from their country or culture, from the society they are part of, or from God. Such exile can be due to our own behaviour or to the views of those around us, or to prejudices that are deliberately or unthinkingly applied

As part of the discussion on our first session of the Lenten study we listened to a clip of Anglicans around the world as to what alienation or exile meant for them in their situation.

The definition of alienation is: *the state of being an outsider or the feeling of being isolated, as from society.*

Here are some of the phrases used by those in the video clip:

Deprivation; excluded; not knowing love; being judged and discriminated against, not being seen, known or loved, alienated from the resources that are around us, forbidden to share in cultural, religious, and social activities, no-one to share bad (and good) news with.

I think that many of us would have to acknowledge that we have not known the same degree of alienation that those to whom we heard have, but most of us will also know – in some small way – what it is like to be out of step with those around us, or to be judged for some aspect of our lives in which we differ from others – or what it is like to start again in a new place and community where

no-one knows us. And that can give us some small taste of being in exile because we are not understood. Or we feel that no-one cares. Maybe we even suffer some lack or setback.

When I look at our gospel reading I sense that Nicodemus is feeling somewhat alienated from the other Jewish leaders and also from God. Nicodemus has come to Jesus to question him, come at night when he is less likely to be seen and judged for seeking Jesus out. Because the other Jewish leaders are trying to reduce Jesus' influence so that people will not go to him for teaching and healing. For Nicodemus to want to discuss these major issues with Jesus indicates that he is not satisfied with the current state of things and thus he must be at odds with his fellow leaders.

And the reason he comes to Jesus is to learn more about God, which shows that he is aware that his relationship with God is not as deep and fulfilling as he wants it to be. He believes that Jesus is truly from God and so Jesus is the one to turn to in order to find out how he can be fully reconciled to God. And, of course, Jesus does

not turn away a genuine seeker, teaching Nicodemus of the Holy Spirit and the promise of new life.

To him Jesus speaks those the words that make up one of the most familiar and probably the most quoted from Scripture:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3: 16-17)*

These two verses offer a powerful explanation for the reason that God sent Jesus into the world. God loves the world. The attitudes and behaviours of the world are contrary to God's will. According to everyday logic, God should be angry with the world, yet God loves the world so consequently acts for its'good by giving Jesus, not for the crucifixion alone, but to this entire earthly life in which he reveals the way to eternal life. And in this life there will be no exile or alienation.

In our first reading Abram is being sent by God to an unfamiliar place – in fact he doesn't even know where it is he will end up. He

is told to leave his country and his family network and go where God leads him, assured of God's blessing. Abram – later to be renamed Abraham – will be alienated from the places, the people and the culture that he has known all his life. He will head into the unknown, prompted by the leading of God and under the promise of God's protection. Although separated from all he has known all his life, Abraham will not be separated from the God who has called him out from all he has known in order to be part of God's plan – although it will take courage and strength to do so.

That Abraham coped with the separation from his ancestral home and his whanau is witnessed by Paul who, in the epistle, explained how he remained faithful to God and is now described as the 'father of many nations' because of that faithful life.

God, through Jesus, came to ensure that everyone knew that they have a place in the Kingdom, where there is no exile and no alienation. The story I began with, about Cardinal Van Thuan, and the experiences of those from around the Anglican Communion

who also had stories of alienation were in situations beyond their control. For many of them their feeling of being foreign, even in their native land, comes from the ways that others see them and treat them. The colour of their skin, being of a different tribe or ethnicity, being considered to be of a lower socio-economic class, or a following a different religion...all these can be the basis for the treatment that makes them feel alienated from those around them.

And in such situations the attitude that needs changing is that of the people who make them feel that difference. To be seen as worthwhile; to be accepted as being worthy of the same opportunities as everyone else; to be treated as having a rightful place in society and something valuable to contribute – actually, to sum it up, to be seen as God sees us, all equally loved, is the answer. Love includes a dimension of feeling but goes beyond to include actions for the good of the other and the community. As we live out our salvation in word and action may we do so joyously, even in dire circumstances, because it is then that our witness speaks most eloquently of where our hope is founded.