

## Reflection on the readings for the 30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

I have enjoyed classical music for most of my adult life, but it wasn't until around ten years ago that I decided to take a look at opera in earnest. It hadn't been an art form that I particularly enjoyed or understood, nevertheless undaunted I booked a season ticket with the Victorian Opera. I had hoped that would allow me to experience a range of operas from light to grand opera. Apologies in advance to opera aficionados, but I found it to be a bit too melodramatic for my liking and only one of the shows found me returning home feeling happy. This I believe is not a problem with the art form but rather an issue of my reception of the art form. Despite the fact that I found the plots and the characters to be rather simplistically portrayed, I understood that the composer was very effective in highlighting, in a larger than life way, those common tragic human experiences of murder and betrayal and revenge and the uplifting ones of love. For me the characters almost became caricatures and I didn't see a lot of subtlety, but I think I understand correctly that this was deliberately done and it is the intent of the art form to highlight the dramatic emotional content. As it turned out, right in the middle of the opera season my own life was to take a melodramatic turn when I was diagnosed with cancer of the prostate, so I never did get to see the end of the season, perhaps if I had I would have grown to appreciate opera more than I do, who knows!

I come from humble stock, I have spoken previously about not growing up as a Catholic, as an adult I have learned, and of course am still learning about Christianity and Catholicity. I can say for sure that one of the big challenges we have today is speaking with, or even making some sort of lived sense, to a largely secular western society. All groups have a tendency to use words that make sense to the group but are unintelligible

to outsiders. In my own experience I have often been on the receiving end of undecoded 'church-speak'. Possible as a result of my background I tend to identify with the ordinary folk and it is in my nature to look for "down to earth" ways of expressing human truth and experience. I liken it to being preferentially aligned with say with the poems of the Australian bard C.J Dennis rather than say Shakespeare. Let me share a brief example of what I mean.

In Dennis's *'Songs of the Sentimental Bloke'*, poem number five, *'The Play'* he writes;

*Wot's in a name? -- she sez . . . An' then she sighs, An' clasps 'er little 'ands, an' rolls 'er eyes. "A rose," she sez, "be any other name, Would smell the same. Oh, w'erefore art you Romeo, young sir? Chuck yer ole pot, an' change yer moniker!"*

Contrast this with act two scene two the play *Romeo and Juliet* by the Bard himself, where Juliet says;

*'Tis but thy name that is my enemy. Thou art thyself, though not a Montague. What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot, Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part Belonging to a man. O, be some other name! What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet. So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called, Retain that dear perfection which he owes without that title. Romeo, doff thy name, and for that name, which is no part of thee Take all myself.'*

Maybe the Australian slang of the 1930's might challenge our understanding today as much as Shakespeare's writing in 1594, however I personally prefer the straightforward, direct Australian poetic narrative that originated from everyday human experience. An article written in the *Melbourne Herald* on Boxing Day 1931 (pg.6) has C.J. Dennis telling the reporter that his poem was suggested to him back in 1913. He saw a couple, as he said, "obviously out of their element" seated in the stalls at a performance of "Romeo and Juliet." They were holding hands and nevertheless appeared quite carried away by Shakespeare's immortal story, in which they, perhaps, saw something of their own loving romance. C.J Dennis chatted with the man during the interval and this

inspired him to write this incident into his famous love story of the Bloke and Doreen. The language may well be very different, but the emotional content, the love story and the power to move us remains undiminished with time and how we tell that story will remain a sign of the times as it did for C.J Dennis.

And so it is with Scripture, this is the story we are challenged to communicate to the world today, it is really an emotionally powerful love story, an uplifting story that can reach the hearts and minds of all if we let it. Even though our appreciation of language, culture and textual content, changes over time, the underlying content of God's Word remains unaltered. In today's gospel Jesus says in no uncertain terms; "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. ... You shall love your neighbour as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments." Before going any further we could well ask the question what did the prevailing culture understand about love when Matthew was writing his gospel. Well unlike today's western culture, Mediterranean culture was very much group centred rather than individually centred. Family was everything, parents and the elderly were honoured, the group gave you your sense of identity and your sense of belonging. Love in this context is best understood as an attachment to the group and as a feeling of belonging. Therefore to love God with all one's heart is to be totally attached to God to totally belong to God. To love neighbour as self is to be as totally attached to people in one's family or extended family. Just as in an opera story the individual character is not as important as the relationship to the whole. That whole is God and only God knows the full meaning of love, but we can say that love defines our relationships; love is the sign of obedience to any commandment and love is the greatest commandment because it truly is the nature of God that extends far beyond any law.

Now we get to the heart of the matter, we do not ever love in the abstract do we? Have you ever been asked or have you ever asked someone yourself, "how much do you love me"? Child or sometimes even adults will hold their hands and arms wide apart and will say big or bigger or a

lot, a lot. Child and adult know instinctively alike that love cannot be measured in this way. The question we should really be asking or answering is how does that love show itself in our lives. I would like to leave you today with a radical idea based on my own experience with the church and that is in order to learn to love than firstly the church and its members need to learn to listen. Theology and teaching tradition have their place, but it is as strange and as foreign a language as 20<sup>th</sup> century Australian slang or 16<sup>th</sup> century prose is to most of us today. We need to become listeners first. Pope Francis's new Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* calls all of us to a new encounter with the world, to listen to people who think differently to us and who have different life experiences. Sister Simone Campbell is a Sister of Social Service and a lawyer, she says of *Fratelli Tuttie*... "this call to encounter is a refreshing approach to shaping our world not through power dynamics but through the experience of all—especially those who are marginalised", ...in these difficult times,.. (we should)... heed Pope Francis's call to encounter, to listening, and to profound reform if we hope to build a more hopeful, more inclusive, and more loving future out of this current suffering and chaos. I want to quickly now say something about the reality and the putting of what we have spoken of into practice.

The Greek word for the verb love in today's gospel passage is *agapao*, which means to totally give ourselves over to something. Giving yourself over to someone or something totally is never going to be easy. So what should we do when our efforts seem mediocre and even at times hypocritical. Well everyone can practice listening and everyone can be assured that God listens to them and loves them. Also when we do speak in love we do it with the assurance that this love that Jesus speaks of is never solely our own. Authentic love is of one nature. Jesus is saying that love of God and love of neighbour are like one another, this really means that it is the same Source and the same Love that allows each of us to love ourselves and others and God at the same time. But learning to love is never abstract and it is never a one off event, it is rather a growing deeper into love as a life-long journey. If at a point in our lives actuality remains a struggle to achieve, sometimes the heart can only go somewhere through desire rather than in actuality. We learn in life that God is with

us, Jesus is alive and we learn the importance of the group, each other, in making God's love a reality in the World, we learn to listen, and we learn to speak in a way that is understandable and attractive and relevant to people lives today. May God bring you peace.

*“What you are doing I cannot do, what I'm doing you cannot do, but together we are doing something beautiful for God, and this is the greatness of God's love for us—To give us the opportunity to become holy through the works of love that we do because holiness is not the luxury of the few. It is a very simple duty for you, for me, you in your position, in your work and I and others, each one of us in the work, in the life that we have given our word of honour to God....You must put your love for God in a living action.”*

-Mother Teresa, From Where There is Love, There is God