

31st Sunday (B)

- If you are about my age, educated in Victoria in secondary school in the 1970s you will have read something from Solzhenitsyn in your compulsory reading for English.
- The great Russian novelist, historian & short story writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn as a youth was a passionate & zealous Communist, but his loyal service did not prevent him from becoming one of the many victims of the Russian Communist regime.
- Solzhenitsyn exposed some of the brutality in his novels: "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich", "The Gulag Archipelago" & "Cancer Ward".
- Those novels made Russians themselves & the rest of world aware of the horror of the Soviet system.
- Later in his life Solzhenitsyn asked what went wrong - how could a country with such a magnificent cultural heritage fall into such wide-scale barbarity?
- To find the answer Solzhenitsyn recalled the days when he was a youth.
- *Everything seemed so hopeful after the great Revolution, but some of the older people saw that things were not right. "A great disaster," they said, "had befallen Russia: People have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened."*
- Fifty years later Solzhenitsyn reflected on the bitter fruits of that disaster.
- *"If I were called upon to identify briefly the principal trait of the entire twentieth century," he said, "I would be unable to find anything more precise & pithy than to repeat once again: 'People have forgotten God; that is why all this has happened.'"*
- When the Soviet government condemned Solzhenitsyn to exile, the Western countries at first received him warmly.
- But, that warm reception turned cold, when he began pointing out a similar issue in the West - he spoke about how the West was experiencing a *"drying up of the religious consciousness."* And that the "objective of life is not prosperity, but maturing of the soul."
- According to Solzhenitsyn this happened because we have been ridiculing the concepts of good & evil for several centuries.
- We have become embarrassed to appeal to eternal concepts – to God.
- *"In the West", he said, people have become "embarrassed to state that evil makes its home in the individual human heart before it enters the political system."* Evil isn't just some ephemeral cloud that descends on the world, it comes from the hearts of individual people.
- We have forgotten God.
- For many people removing God is a vital step to a bright future.
- But without God, the future is not so bright.
- If we forget God, it might become a nightmare from which we never awake.

- Many centuries ago God formed a nation with a single purpose: to remember him. He gave them this prayer: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Love the Lord your God with all your heart & with all your soul & with all your strength" – to love God with your whole being.
- They were to say that prayer when they got up in the morning & when they went to bed; they were to say it when they travelled & when they were in their home; they were to never forget God.
- Nothing was more important than remembering God because it is in God that we find our true dignity & worth.
- When asked about the first commandment in today's Gospel Jesus adds something no one asked him – "The second is this: love your neighbour as yourself."
- The flip side to forgetting God is a denial of true love for ourselves.
- One reason we find it difficult to love others is that we do not love our own selves.
- So, how can I love the person next to me if I do not appreciate myself?
- This is the synthesis of life: Everything – religion, morality & success in life depends on these 2 commandments.
- The command to love isn't just one of a number of other duties or rules – love is the only healthy way to live before God & people.
- If in politics, religion, social life or individual behaviour there is something that doesn't proceed from love or goes against it, it cannot possibly help to build a more humane life – there can be no human progress without love.
- We can take God out of politics & secular government & say it's enough to consider only the neighbour; we can take the neighbour out of religion & say that the only important thing is serving God (& many have done & continue to do that), but for Jesus, God & neighbour are inseparable.
- For him (& therefore his followers) it is not possible to love God & disregard the neighbour.
- Religion always risks perverting life by living with a notion that in the name of honouring God, some people can be seen as the enemy & deplorable things have been done to people in God's name.
- Any religious practise that claims to honour God & at the same time abuse or do violence against people is diseased & corrupted.
- That is why it is so necessary to remember this essential message of Jesus.
- There can be no sacred space in which we can be alone with God while ignoring the existence of others & the plight of people.
- It is not possible to worship God & forget those who suffer.
- The love of God which excludes the neighbour comes down to a lie.
- When we try to fulfil the dual command issued by Jesus, we become humane Christians - Christian humanists who may hope to hear his words at the end of today's Gospel: 'You are not far from the Kingdom of God.'