

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.'

- I'd like to read for you the last words of Pope Francis' homily to the bishops of Europe that he delivered last month:
- *"So many people in Europe see the faith as déjà vu, a relic of the past. Why? Because they have not seen Jesus at work in their own lives. Often this is because we, by our lives, have not sufficiently shown him to them. God makes himself seen in the faces and actions of men and women transformed by his presence. If Christians, instead of radiating the contagious joy of the Gospel, keep speaking in an outworn intellectualistic and moralistic religious language, people will not be able to see the Good Shepherd. They will not recognize the One who loves each of his sheep, calls them by name, and bears them on his shoulders. They will not see the One whose incredible passion we preach: for it is a consuming passion, a passion for humanity. This divine, merciful and overpowering love is itself the perennial newness of the Gospel. It demands of us, dear brothers, wise and bold decisions, made in the name of the mad love with which Christ has saved us. Jesus does not ask us to make arguments for God, but to show him, in the same way the saints did, not by words but by our lives. He calls us to prayer and poverty, creativity and gratuity. Let us help today's Europe, faint with weariness, to rediscover the ever youthful face of Jesus and his Bride. How can we fail to devote ourselves completely to making all people see this unfading beauty?"*