



Homily to the Parish of Gosford 11 August 2019

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Diocesan Administrator

Many years ago, there was quite a popular film called, “Dead Poets Society.” The catch cry of the film, *Carpe Diem*, “Seize the Day”, became somewhat famous in itself and got to be widely used. The film was very much a portrayal of the philosophy of Henry Thoreau. Thoreau was a well-known American humanist philosopher of the 19th century. His famous work was called *Walden* and was an account of him leaving the city and retiring to the side of Walden Pond in the north-east of the United States, at which he sought to come to the essence of what life was all about. It represented his own sea-change, as we would call it today. Thoreau was very conscious of how we can go through our life as people who are only half-awake. We can lead our life as if we were asleep. These are amongst his most famous lines:

To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a [person] who was quite awake. How could I have looked [them] in the face?
We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not be mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep.¹

Long after Thoreau, the Australian artist, Michael Leunig, wonderfully describes this in a cartoon in which he has his customary little figure, knapsack over his shoulder, following a little duck, which for Leunig is the symbol of the soul, traipsing over what first looks like the tops of mountains. However, on closer examination, the mountain peaks show themselves to be the noses of upturned faces which are asleep. It is Leunig’s marvellous way of depicting how the spiritual person is the one who is fully awake while the rest of the world sleeps.

It is easy for us to go through life only half awake. It is easy for us to go through our life asleep. But then we go through our life only half-alive. Jesus has come that we may have life. If this is so, then Jesus enables us to live our life fully by rousing us from sleep and by awakening us. A constant refrain in the gospels is the one that underscores today’s gospel: “Stay awake!” “Stand ready!” It is not simply a moral injunction to keep us on our toes, as it were, lest our actions be surprised and exposed. Rather, Jesus urges us to stay awake because this is precisely the way in which we can receive life in all its fullness. The one who is awake is the one who is conscious, the one who is alive. The Spirit of Jesus comes to us, therefore, in order to awaken us.

¹ Henry Thoreau, *Walden* (Signet Classic, 1960), 65.

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But how does the Spirit awaken us? There are many ways. But not all of these are positive. Yes, the Spirit can awaken us through beauty, through love, through fidelity, through a sense of confluence in our life. But the Spirit can also awaken us through disappointment, through failure, through disillusionment. These too are moments that stop us short, that mean we can no longer go on as we had been, that invite us to see ourselves and our lives in a new, different way.

This weekend we gather in the shock of news that is distressing for us a community. Someone whom many of us knew, and knew well, has now admitted that some of his actions in your own community have, by their criminal nature, damaged people who trusted him. The lives of those people have been forever affected. And our life too, as a community is damaged, as we are confronted with the recognition that we have not been spared the crime of sexual abuse in our midst. This jolts us; it disturbs us; it makes us angry; it makes us sad. We are not allowed the passivity of innocence. The way we see things changes; our lives change.

As confronting, as difficult as such a recognition is, the Gospel suggests to us that when our eyes and ears are opened even in this way – when we are jolted from our complacency – there is an invitation. The less we hear, the less we see, the less responsibility we have to assume. But the more we see, the more we hear, the more we live with an open ear and eye, the more responsibility with which we must live.

All of us have responsibility to keep our communities safe. This can never be left to a few. All of us need to be vigilant for any behaviour that we consider not to be safe, and that might be putting the safety of our young people, especially, in jeopardy. We must be vigilant, and we must be active. We must be ready to speak up. Sadly, events have shown we cannot rely simply on our trust of others, whoever they might be – whether they might be priests, or even family members. If we see or hear of behaviour that concerns us, we must speak up and act.

In so doing, we learn. We learn from what we have experienced. And our learning itself keeps us more awake in our life. To paraphrase T.S. Elliot, we cannot be those who have the experience and miss the meaning.² Our confidence is shaken; our trust is confused; our faith itself is rocked. Yet, even in the most painful of experiences that we have in our life, an invitation awaits us. If we can but stay with such difficult experiences long enough to perceive that invitation, then the experience can become for us not something that works against us, leaving us in despair and isolation, but one that becomes for us something ‘redemptive’ – in other words, one from which a new possibility might emerge.

It is the Lord of Life who calls us always to new possibility. This is the gift of the Resurrection to us – yes, even in the darkest moments of our life.

² See T S Elliot, “The Dry Salvages” (1941), in *Four Quartets*