

ST MARK'S 2018 FINAL SERMON

+ In the name of God; Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Amen.

As most of you know, Ellie and I reside in one of the second-floor flats overlooking Kermode Street. It's an interesting perch! We see all sorts of things. Black-clad cyclists delivering Sodexo-dodging Uber eats. An elderly neighbour with the longest dog lead in the world [*the dog's crossed the road before the owner leaves home*]. Parking inspectors chalking tyres. Drivers returning, rubbing out the chalk mark, then walking off again.

But what we notice more than anything else, is the constant stream of patients heading for the Women's and Children's Hospital. Especially mothers and children. Occasionally what we see is heart-wrenching. So much so that we sometimes spontaneously include those passing by in our morning prayers.

What those people would make of that [*if they knew*], I have no idea. If I sprinted down the stairs to ask ... well ... they might say, "That's all very nice you've prayed for us ... but did you ask God why? Why our child was born this way? Why our dreams have been crushed? Why we've been singled out for suffering?" And to those questions ... I have to admit ... there are no easy answers ... sometimes no answers at all.

Many of us feel that St Mark's has been singled out too. Singled out this year for institutional suffering. And we've had to ask questions – some hard questions. But, unlike the hurting parents trundling past our back fence, we know there are answers. And one of them lies in that curiously pungent image that rounded out Evie's reading a few minutes ago. Here it is again, except paraphrased a bit. "*Just as undesirable floaties can cause a bottle of Chanel Eau De Parfum to stink, so a brain fade, a bit of rank stupidity, can trash a fine reputation.*"

Examples of one person's foolishness causing misery for countless others aren't hard to find. Think of Francesco Schettino. In 2012 he was captain of the ill-fated cruise liner, *Costa Concordia*, when it struck a rock just off the Italian coast. Tragically, it capsized and sank with the loss of 32 lives. What happened was that Captain Schettino had ordered his ship to sail dangerously close to the shoreline, allegedly, to impress his mistress.

But what really shredded his reputation was this. Instead of supervising an evacuation when the ship was sinking and panic reigned, Schettino jumped into

a lifeboat and made a quick exit. An Italian court was unimpressed. It found him guilty of manslaughter and dereliction of duty and sentenced him to 16 years in the slammer. And if you can believe the tabloid press, he was [*for a time at least*] the most hated man in Italy.

Whether St Mark's is, or was, the most hated college in Australia ... I'm not sure. Certainly it's a view vociferously advocated on various social media platforms this year. In some quarters, our reputation stinks. All the same, there's nothing to be gained by pointing the finger at anyone we suspect of having been a fly in the once-sweet-perfume of St Mark's reputation. Instead, we continue to ask, what needs to change? ... what we can do better? ... or differently? ... or not at all? And we embrace the fact that there's no place in our ranks for sexual harassment, hazing rituals, or any form of behaviour detrimental to others.

But enough of the institutional response. What about the individual impacts? For a few, at least, they've been profound. Others of us are leaving virtually unscathed. But not necessarily to a safe space. Because, out in the wider world, the culture wars are raging. And we're all in the line of fire. In my job, it's a sub-species, the gender wars. Not all my parishioners agree but I'm a staunch supporter of women in the priesthood ... which is good because my first wife, Val, had pretty firm views. She had a poster plastered to our bedroom door. "Sure God made man first," it said. "But you always do a rough draft before you create the final masterpiece."

But the culture wars are nebulous ... and all-pervasive. Like an octopus ... tentacles everywhere. And whoever you are, whatever your profession, you can never be quite sure when the trolls will pounce. One, stupid, fly-in-the-perfume post, and you're fair game. So what do you do when you're the subject of a Facebook frenzy or Twitter tantrum? Obviously you ask yourself ... as St Mark's College has had to do ... is the criticism, or any part of it, valid, and if it is, act or respond in an appropriate manner. But if you truly believe your opinion is well-founded ... don't buckle ... don't back down!

Look at the politician Boris Johnson in Britain and his recent comments on the burqa [*lamprooning it yet at the same time in favour of it*]. The reaction on social media was incendiary. But do you know what Boris did? Nothing! He refused to apologize. Whether you agreed with him or not, he stood by his views. And when the furore died down, as it inevitably does, he became even more popular among voters at large. As comedian Rowan Atkinson observed, "All jokes about religion cause offence, so it's pointless apologizing for them."

Speaking of religion ... you want a safe space? Try a prayer closet! You can pray absolutely anywhere, anytime. As the Master just read to us [*paraphrasing again*], “Don’t stress about stuff! Instead, talk to God about it. Tell him what you need and thank him for what he’s done already.” However, with 7 billion potential pray-ers on the planet, where do you stand in the queue? Isn’t it a bit like lining up as a kid for an audience with Father Christmas?

Well, I don’t believe so! No analogy’s perfect but consider this. Suppose I’m writing a novel. I write, “The Master closed the College Club report and picked up her iPhone XS.” For the Master, there’s no time interval between the two actions, but for me, creator of the story ... between writing the first and second part of that sentence, I might stop and download the Uber Eats app, or walk up to the Royal Oak for a six-pack, or go fishing for two weeks at Streaky Bay.

The point is, God is not hurried along in the timestream of this universe anymore than I am bound to the imaginary time of my novel. In other words, God has infinite resources to devote to you. You are as much alone with him in prayer as if you were the only person in existence. Just don’t expect answers to every single question though. In a vast universe, in the complexities of life, there are some things that you and I, simply won’t, don’t, and can’t get ... at least not this side of eternity. When Richard Feynman received the Nobel Prize for helping develop quantum electrodynamics theory, a journalist asked him to explain it in a nutshell. “If I could tell you in two sentences,” Feynman said, “I would not have won the Nobel Prize.” I think God’s in a similar situation.

Finally, I’ll close with this ... some wisdom from a different Richard ... Richard Halverson. Halverson is a former Chaplain of the United States Senate and this is a benediction he often used. “You go nowhere in this world by accident. Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God has put you there. He has a purpose in your being there. Christ, who dwells in you, has something he wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in his grace and love and power.”

Amen.