

As I come to the end of my first year in the Parish and acknowledge that on this coming Tuesday, I end the 25th year of being in “professional” ministry, I suddenly feel weary. Having taken only one week away this last of the 52 has not been a wise move, and perhaps one that I would say to those in my charge, foolish.

I love it when I encounter people who boast “I haven’t had a holiday for x years, and it hasn’t harmed me!” Often, I look at them, and like James Comey in the Oval Office, vow to myself “Don’t say anything, don’t even move!” If we say this, then we delude ourselves, as much as Jesus himself reminded us that if we say we are without sin, later this guile has already convicted us.

Why? Well, to start with, at the heart of the commandments is the need for rest. Based on the first words of the 10 Commandments, perhaps retrospectively shaping the first narrative of the creation, we all need to take a Sabbath: a holy rest. Through the working of the lands and understanding of the way the soil needs to be tilled and left fallow, the concept of time of repairing and preparing was very much understood. To rest was essential.

The psalmist, in Psalm 127 reminds us clearly and fundamentally why this is important.

It is in vain that you rise up early  
and go late to rest,  
eating the bread of anxious toil;  
for he gives sleep to his beloved.<sup>1</sup>

It is in the giving of rest that we are afforded that which is essential: the opportunity to close our eyes, let ourselves be repaired, and then, gather strength for the preparation for what goes ahead. And again, it is in that sleep that the most precious thing can happen – we can connect and engage in what is the dream of God that brings us into the fullness of the beauty of God’s quietness. It is a gift to all people. It is a sharing that inspires our visions and actions. It is the levelling of injustice and the restoration of the perfection of God’s creation. It is at the heart of what we are to be and do in taking part in God’s mission.

I learned many bad habits from my two stints in residential colleges. One was that you did indeed rise up early after going too late to rest. The best time to study was after 10.30 pm. At John Fisher College in Hobart, this was after The Buttery, the college bar, had closed. Apart from Wednesday nights, it was only open between 10 and 10.30. The College Canteen was also opened at that time. Once it closed, the evening was then quiet enough to contemplate study. The same rhythm seemed to apply at Trinity College. Around 10.30 pm, all went quiet. Last drinks were called at the Chapel of Ease known as St Naughton’s Hotel, the trams became more infrequent, and the college went into a deep rhythm of writing essays and preparing tutorials.

Why rise early? Breakfast finished at 8.30!

It was a rhythm that stayed with me, until recently. Now, I rise early thanks to the rooster over the back fence; the screeching sulphur-crested cockies, the joyous warbling of the magpies, and raucous laughter of kookaburras in the pre-dawn light. At night, I am serenaded to sleep by the sound of frogs, crickets, mobs of kangaroos passing by, boobooks, tawny frogmouths and the odd barking owl. And into the slumber comes the one thing that is sure: it is a time of repair and prepare, ready to rise again into the new day.

So, you may even dream to ask, where is this self-indulgent rant going? Yes, we get it, he needs a holiday. Yes, I do, and so do you, but not necessarily in the same place or at the same time! For the record, I’m looking at having February away, ready to arrive back in time for Ash Wednesday, rising early, and confronting the commuters at Gisborne station with the words of John the Baptist: “The kingdom of God is nye. Prepare the way of the Lord;

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 127.2-3

repent and believe the Gospel.” This will then be followed by ashing, reminding them of their mortality: dust you are, and to dust, you shall return.

In the rest and rhythm of life that is part of our life on the Ranges, there is a need to make sure that we are also in the rhythm that will allow us to be part of God’s dreaming. We need to rest. At the heart of that rest is the repair-prepare cycle of our bodies. For Jesus, this was the quiet that he found in moving away from the busyness of the day to day mission to pray. There, he would engage in thanks and allow himself to be prepared for the toil of doing it all again. The purpose, as we heard in the prophetic voice of the one in the wilderness was to turn upside down the ways of the world.

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’<sup>2</sup>

This is the same mission that we, as the Body of Christ, also have. We are called to being again and turn upside down our own vices and failings. Coming into this week has been an opportunity to look back at the 25 years of active ministry, warts and all. My mind was taken back to unseasonable heat hitting Hobart, much like it did this past week. I remember that the Dean of Hobart, Dr Stuart Blackler, insisted that we wear our heavy cassocks to prayers and sessions, and even sent us out in the suburbs in full collars and cassocks so that we can be accustomed to the way people would perceive us.

I recall a conversation vividly on the Blackman’s Bay beach as I trundled along the sand in the 37° heat wearing my dog collar and cassock. I was stopped by one of the locals concerned that I might overheat in the medieval garb. He knew about Mary Knoll Retreat House and had seen many a penguin-like Sister of Charity, Mercy and Presentation do the same walk. He was an inspiration to listen to as he forewarned that the Church is going to be placed where as a deacon and priest, I would be called to challenge people about the way they live, and to draw them into the fullest holiness that was prophesied. I never saw him again. Maybe it was all a dream. I don’t know.

Dr Blackler’s retreat was based on Ephesians. There in the fourth chapter is St Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesians that they also must be prepared to turn things on their heads.

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, clad in the clothes of thick wool and uncomfortable plastic inserts, there was a sense of preparing to become a new self. But Paul, as always, was more explicit as to what the appeal to the believers must be.

...put away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not allow the sun to go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; instead, let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:4b-6

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 4:22-24

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 4.25-32

The weight of all of this was summed up by Bishop Ron Stone. “When you feel the pressure that we, as bishops, place on your head, be mindful that this is the calling to which the Church affirms as being genuine and true. And know this, it will not always be easy. Prepare yourself well.”

Now, 25 years on, I can see that through the glass, dimly.<sup>5</sup> Putting on, as Paul would suggest, the armour of holiness and humility requires us to be mindful of the need for the Sabbath, and to allow ourselves to once in a while become fallow. If we all work together, the one who rests will be covered, and the work will continue.

Friends, here at this point in time, in the Church’s year, we are called to begin a time of fallow. It may seem odd to say that as the pressure mounts to finish things before Christmas; teachers to write reports, hold parent-teacher interviews and schools to showcase their talents at the end of year assemblies. There are community events to attend, and we all need time to overstock our larders for the one day of the year when everything is closed. Rest? “Tell him he’s kidding!”<sup>6</sup>

But it is. Like the body needs a good holiday, the Church is now preparing for its holidays. Let me just reclaim that word. It is making for its HOLY DAYS. It is a time for letting go of the busyness that seems to be Advent in the modern world and letting the holy days become part of our repair-prepare for the coming year.

On the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere, and our longest, we recall Thomas. This is the holy day in which we are told: “Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe.”<sup>7</sup> There is a strong sense that coming from the day with the shortest light up there where the water flows the wrong way that seeing is not everything.

We then move into Christmas: the day we remember that God risked everything and became one with us in the most unlikely and least potent of all options, a baby. God flattens the mountains, makes the paths straight, exalting the lowly and deposing the powerful with a small boy.

We remember Stephen the Deacon who was the first to wear the martyr’s crown; John the Evangelist who gave us the Eternal Hymn to the Word; and the Innocents that led to our child Saviour becoming a refugee. Thomas Beckett, stood for levelling the courts of England, only to be levelled in his own cathedral; Wycliffe gave us the first translation of the Word of God in our native tongue; Jesus is remembered for fully embracing the Jewish traditions and was named “he who saves”. Basil of Caesarea helped give us the orthodoxy that is the Nicene Creed, and the Magi came from the East to reveal the Epiphany that the light to lighten the Gentiles was incarnate.

Holy days. As we await their Advent, we too are called to enter into them with awe and reflection, repairing our bodies from the year that has been, and preparing ourselves for the year to come.

Let yourselves have the rest you need to become part of that ongoing dream of the God of justice and mercy, so that, fully refreshed, you can walk humbly with your God. This is what the Holy Days are meant to enable us to do. Let us not overlook the gift of God to us through the cycles of the year, artificial as it may be, but embrace them in the fullness that is Christ’s mission, and as his body, ours.

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<sup>5</sup> cf 1 Cor 13

<sup>6</sup> cf *The Castle*, 1997 Village Roadshow

<sup>7</sup> cf John 21