

BELLARINE LINKED CONGREGATIONS

REFLECTION FOR JUSTICE AND MISSION SERVICE JUNE 25 2023

LECTIONARY: Psalm 71: 1-6

Luke 3: 10-11

Matthew 25 : 35-46

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In an unassuming corner of a busy Sydney street, a crumpled figure lies sleeping on a park bench. (slide)



The scene is so familiar that no one looks twice at this homeless person amid the hustle of a CBD lunchtime. But an observant eye would notice a few surprising details: Firstly the figure isn't moving; it is statue-still. And secondly the feet of this man, protruding from his blanket, bear deep gashes (slide 2)



The figure is, in fact, a statue of the “Homeless Jesus.” The bench is in the grounds of a church – St James’ Church in King St, Sydney

The bronze sculpture is one of a series of about 100 Homeless Jesus statues throughout the world, a number of which are in Australia. There is one at the entrance to Newman College at the University of Melbourne. Maybe if

you are having a day in Melbourne, you might like to take a tram up Swanston Street to have a look and maybe sit on the seat to reflect a while. The sculpture invites you, quite literally, to sit at the feet of Christ.

Canadian artist Timothy Schmalz has been creating Christian sculptures for almost 30 years and the idea for Homeless Jesus was born when Schmalz was driving past people living on the streets in Toronto.

He describes the experience:

“I found myself shocked. There was one person in particular, who was completely covered up in a blanket. There was something haunting about that – this fragile human form in stark contrast to all the busyness surrounding them. I just felt that I saw Jesus. I couldn’t let go of thinking that I had just **witnessed Jesus**. So I went back to my studio and, about a week later, I thought maybe I could create a sculpture that would make other people have that experience.”

This resulted in the first Homeless Jesus about ten years ago. Since then, the Homeless Jesus has taken on a life of its own, with regular commissions for the statue around the world. “The sculpture is becoming almost a movement, more than just an ornament,” says Schmalz. He notes that the cross-cultural appeal of the sculpture may stem from its ambiguity. The face of the statue is deliberately concealed, so that everyone can connect and identify with the Jesus it portrays.

The sculpture is intended to be “a visual translation of Matthew 25.” that Andrea read for us today. In that chapter of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus likens himself to a homeless person to teach about the need for compassion
“I love how Matthew 25 reveals slowly the point ... It’s almost like you have that eureka moment when Jesus reveals that whenever you’ve helped the least, you’ve done that to [him],” says Schmalz.

“Like this passage, the sculpture reveals almost at the end of the visual experience that it is Jesus ... At first you just see it is a statue of a homeless person but with closer investigation, you realise it’s Jesus.”
There have, in fact, been many reports of the sculpture being mistaken for a real person. In one city it has even provoked numerous calls of concern to the police and paramedics.

Schmalz says:

“Visual art is a very powerful way of preaching. Some people find it very shocking. But I like to say that it’s only as shocking as the gospels are, Sitting on the bench while I was sculpting the Jesus figure, I thought, my goodness I have never really been close to a homeless person. There is often a bubble that we create, or a forcefield that we put in place, so we don’t get too close to the marginalised people”. “So I thought, I’m going to put an invitation here. I going to put a place to actually sit and touch the sculpture, perhaps pray, perhaps to meditate.”

Let’s take a quiet moment to view the sculpture again and reflect on our own contact with homeless people.

Having seen these confronting visual images, can I invite you now to imagine we are using our ears, and reflect on the following voices of 3 people:

Who am I? I am homeless - I had to leave the family home after a beating;

Who am I? I am homeless - I moved out of care where all the decisions were made for me, and now I am faced with life on my own;

Who am I? I am homeless – I've lost my job and stable family and I turned to alcohol, now I'm sleeping rough.

In the psalm we heard a while ago, we hear the words of a man in his old age, who even in the face of a crisis, reaffirms his faith in God - a faith which he says he has held on to since the day he was born. We do not know the crisis **he** is facing, but we can recognise the crises others face.

As a person who is homeless,

What's the crisis? My daily search for safety, warmth and shelter is a reality - not just a story read in the paper or on a poster.

What's the crisis? The shame I feel means I cannot tell my closest relatives where I find a bed each night.

What's the crisis? Being in the grasp of the moneylender, with no hope of a way out.

And it doesn't matter how many blankets I'm given - I long to feel the warmth and comfort I once had in my own bed.

For most of us, homelessness will be an experience that we will never face. Take a moment to think how **you** might **feel**? Silence

Let's listen to this morning's psalm again.

In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. **2** In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me.

3 Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.

4 Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.

5 For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. **6** Upon you I have learned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you.

If we were homeless, would **we** be able to identify with these words of the Psalmist? silence

Despite his circumstances, the psalmist still finds a place to affirm faith in God. But turning from God, turning our back on faith, is not uncommon during a difficult or distressing time. I wonder, do we see homeless people as people of faith? Or do we assume that they are outside faith communities - either abandoned by God or having abandoned God? Or is it more likely that we've never even considered the question.

Perhaps we might begin to consider who the homeless really are, not just statistics, not even just the people who receive our gifts of blankets and toiletries, but people just like us who have had a very raw deal in life; people who need our prayers, our care, and most of all, our love.

Let me finish with those words of John the Baptist in Luke's Gospel that we heard earlier.

"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. He answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

May it be so, and may the sharing be from one to another who are all recipients of God's inclusive love. Amen.