

Twenty Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

During this week it has been hard to have a conversation with anybody that has not included some reference to today's Grand Final. Most of us have probably been asked a number of times if we are Crows supporters. Some people, when asked that question, have had to admit that they used to support the Crows but somewhere along the way they have changed their mind and now they support Port Power. Perhaps today they changed their mind again and were cheering for the Adelaide Crows.

Today's readings help us to reflect upon what it can mean to change your mind when it comes to following the way on which God leads us. In our first reading God uses the Prophet Ezekiel to respond to the charges that he is unjust in the way that he treats those who have changed their way of living. "When the upright man renounces his integrity to commit sin and dies because of this, he dies because of the evil that he himself has committed." But God says that it can go the other way too, and this is what he lovingly desires. "When the sinner renounces his sin to become law abiding and honest, he deserves to live. He has chosen to renounce all his previous sins; he shall certainly live; he shall not die."

Jesus was often in trouble with the Jewish leaders because of the way that he reached out to those they had labelled sinners. But many of these people were the ones who responded to John the Baptist's call to repentance and to the invitation that Jesus made to follow his way of living. Those in leadership were the slowest to respond.

To make the contrast between the response of the so-called sinners and the response of the Jewish leaders Jesus tells the parable found in today's Gospel. In his wonderful teaching style, he asks the chief priests and the elders to tell him which of the two sons in the parable was doing the father's will. They could only say that it was the one who had first said that he would not go out and work in the vineyard but had changed his mind and went, that was doing the will of his father. The Jewish leaders were like the other son who, although he said yes to his father's request, did not go to the vineyard. Jesus challenges those leaders to recall that they neither responded to John the Baptist nor to him, while the people that they despised, the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. The tax collectors and prostitutes were despised by the self-righteous ones mainly because of their service to the occupying Romans. It was like the pot calling the kettle black.

There is always a danger that when we listen to these stories we can think of them as only applying to the people of Jesus' day. We all need to ask what we can draw from this. Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is that we can easily become critical of others while overlooking our own weaknesses. We can easily dismiss anyone who chooses to live with a different set of values than ours. I suppose it is a bit like watching the grand final. If we are an avid Crows supporter it was very difficult to see the good things that the Richmond players were doing. Even if they were playing brilliant football we did not see it; they were just wearing the wrong colours.

The call to be people who can change our minds about things is never easy. It is one thing to be forced by modern technology to learn a different way of doing things. But when it comes to having a different opinion about something important that can be much more difficult. We rightly want to hold onto the good things that we have learnt. We rightly want to defend the values that we have grown up with, values that have formed us well into followers of Jesus. Yet we know that we have to apply those values now in a whole lot of new situations that we could not have anticipated.

It is easy to be swept along by the opinions and values of the secular world in which we live. We may feel that we are kicking against the wind for four quarters. We need to listen well to our coach and have a good game plan to be successful. Like any team we need to support one another in our efforts to do what is right. We need to know why we do what we do.

Today's reading from St. Paul to the Philippians may help us to know why we do what we do. It is the life of Christ that has been planted deep within us that empowers us to live like Christ. St. Paul challenges to live that life generously with others in mind. "There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of their own interests first but everybody thinks of other people's interests instead." St. Paul's advice would not help to win many grand finals, but he does direct our gaze towards Jesus, who is the one we are called to follow. "In your mind you must be the same as Christ Jesus." Paul then goes on to recite that wonderful hymn that describes how Jesus took on our humanity, became one like us so that he could raise us up with him. Today we join all of creation and acclaim Jesus as Lord.