

**FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – 17<sup>th</sup> April 2016 7.30am Sung Eucharist 9.30am Holy Eucharist at Holy Trinity, Terrigal** Readings: Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Thomas Frank is an American political analyst, historian and journalist who said recently that many of those who support Donald Trump in the US presidential campaign are afraid more than they're racist. Trump's blunt approach giving off the impression that he tells it like it is and consequently will act decisively, is part of his appeal.

In his book *One Market under God*, Frank coined the concept of "market populism" which is the idea that the market is the best expression of the will of the people. He explains in the book why it is so appealing although he doesn't believe it himself:

Markets expressed the popular will more articulately and more meaningfully than did mere elections. Markets conferred democratic legitimacy; markets were the friend of the little guy; markets brought down the pompous and the snooty; markets gave us what we wanted; markets looked out for our interests (p. xiv).

Richard Sennett, Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics and University Professor of the Humanities at New York University, in his book *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, says the world that has been created by this market populism, is unsustainable. "Only a certain kind of human being can prosper in unstable, fragmentary social conditions" – someone able to manage short-term relationships and oneself, while constantly mobile, focused on retraining and constantly looking to update their skills, and with an ability to let go of the past. He goes on to say:

A self oriented to the short term, focused on potential ability, willing to abandon past experience is – to put a kindly face on the matter – an unusual sort of human being. Most people are not like this; they need a sustaining life narrative, they take pride in being good at something specific, and they value the experiences they have lived through. The cultural ideal required in new institutions thus damages many of the people who inhabit them" (p. 5).

Such a world view has permeated our whole society and our lives are so formed by it that we don't even notice, nor do we usually question it. After all, it's done us many favours. And therein lays the danger. Our market economy seduces us into a culture of constant consumption. The biggest threat to the Church is not, thank God, in this nation, IS. The biggest threat is not Muslims moving into the neighbourhood wanting to build a mosque. The biggest threat to the Church is not gay people wanting the rights of marriage to be extended to them. The biggest threat is a consumerism that promises everything that the gospel does: why am I here? How can I be happy? How do I gain eternal life? The difference is that the gospel is life-giving; consumerism kills.

Market populism is based on the ideal of freedom – freedom is the ideal that's presented as the argument for our economic and political system. We all want to be free. God has made us to be free. But freedom is not an absolute value. To say, "I am free" is an incomplete statement. I am free but free from what or for what? If I am free, I am free to use my freedom for good or bad. If I use it well, I become 'good' as a result, and the good I do will have a positive effect on those around me. Conversely, if I use it wrongly, the result will be evil which will spread in me and to those around me.

Pope St John Paul II in his book of personal reflections, *Memory and Identity*, says, “The danger of the situation in which we live today consists in the fact that we claim to prescind from the ethical dimension in our use of freedom – that is, from consideration of moral good and evil. A certain concept of freedom, which has widespread support in public opinion at present, diverts attention from ethical responsibilities. Appeal is made today to freedom alone. It is often said: what matters is to be free, released from all constraint or limitation, so as to operate according to private judgement, which in reality is often pure caprice. This much is clear: such liberalism can only be described as primitive. Its influence, however, is potentially devastating” (Pope John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Personal Reflections*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson London, pp 37-38).

The Christian ideal is that we are free to love. St Paul wrote, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). What is the slavery he’s referring to? Shortly after he says, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another” (5:13).

We are free to love. St Thomas Aquinas said the highest realisation of human freedom is to be found in our obedience to the commandment to love God and our neighbour is. Our society says the highest realisation of human freedom is to do as you please, especially to fulfil the endless cycle of consumption. Our model is Christ who laid down his life for his friends.

Many voices clamour for our attention today. How do we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd amidst the cacophony of other voices? Our psalm and Gospel today speak of the shepherd leading his sheep to safe pastures. They also speak of the threats that are ever present to bring harm to the sheep. The voice of Jesus, unlike the voices of consumerism which promise life but bring death, is a voice calling us to nourishment and safety. The shepherd in Psalm 23 is a gracious host preparing a banquet to enjoy, ensuring protection against enemies, and promising an eternal dwelling of blessedness.

At Easter, Anglican writer Muriel Porter wrote in *The Conversation*, an online news analysis site, about the decline in church attendances, especially in the wake of the child abuse scandals. She wrote: “This has prompted huge anxiety in some quarters, resulting in frantic searches for the programme or person that will turn the ship around. And a ‘blame game’ – who can be scapegoated for this ongoing failure?

“Certainly there are faults and failures to lay at the churches’ doors. The revelations of sexual abuse of vulnerable people by clergy and church workers reveal the hypocrisy. . . .

“But the steady decline cannot be ignored either. It suggests that contemporary Australian life priorities, developing over the past few decades, are playing a significant part in the changing pattern of church attendance.

“In a 24/7 world, where people are working long hours, where they can shop at all hours online if not in stores, where their lives are dominated by digital technology and an endless array of entertainment possibilities, the option of attending church is slipping below the radar.

“The aspirational lifestyle, marked by an obsession with home renovation, food, entertaining, and overseas holidays, often place religion and spiritual issues at the lowest level of priority.

“Modern lifestyle is out of kilter with traditional church worship. The quiet rhythms of prayer and sacraments, the emphasis on selfless living and generous giving, sermons and hymn singing are alien to many people.”

All of these are the other voices shouting out the voice of the Good Shepherd. “My sheep hear my voice” (John 10:27a). Jesus answers his questioners today as he answered them then when they asked: “‘If you are the Messiah tell us plainly.’ Jesus answered, ‘I have told you, and you do not believe’” (10:22). The works Jesus does are evidence in themselves if only we see them through the eyes of faith. To those who do see them through eyes of faith, he is one with the Father. He reveals God to us. God will never let us go; no one can snatch us out of his hand. All of the things our consumerist society offers us to provide meaning don’t last. Jesus says, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish” (10:28).

We come to church to discern the Shepherd’s voice amidst all the other voices that clamour for our attention. The voice of the Shepherd brings true freedom. It also provides the only real security. It says, “You belong to me and no one can snatch you out of my hand.”

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