

## 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time      Year A

In recent times I think we have all become very aware of the reality of drought. Even when our farmers have record crops, or our water catchments are at an encouraging high, or Lake Eyre is laden with life, the fear of drought is never far away. We have become very aware of the fragility of the whole Murray-Darling Basin and the probably irreparable damage to the Coorong at the mouth of the Murray. Without rain even the best ground turns into a desert. Sometimes when the rain eventually comes, the ground is so hard that it can't penetrate, and so it runs away, causing flash flooding. And have we not known enough of that in 2011.

So it is with the human heart when it becomes hard. Hard-heartedness gives a measure of invulnerability in so far as a person can't feel and therefore can't be hurt. Nevertheless, hard-heartedness is a sad and pitiful state. To adopt a hard-hearted attitude is to maim oneself.

A hard heart can't feel, can't respond, can't love. A hard heart can't experience sorrow, but neither can it experience joy. A hard heart is a closed heart, so it can't receive. A hard heart is a barren heart. A hard heart is the most serious handicap of all. From a spiritual point of view it is one of the worst things that can happen to anyone. It's a mistake to harden our heart even against one person. We may think we have very good reasons for doing so, but we do ourselves serious damage spiritually.

A soft heart, on the other hand, is a blessing. True, it makes you vulnerable; the soft-hearted are easily hurt. But a soft heart can also be touched, moved and warmed. It can receive. It can be saddened but it can also be marvelously happy. It can respond. It can burst into life like a garden in springtime.

In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela describes his long years of imprisonment on Robben Island. He tells how one day he was called to the main office. General Steyn was visiting the island and wanted to know from Mandela if the prisoners had any complaints. Badenhorst, the officer in command on the island, was also present. Now Badenhorst was feared and hated by the prisoners.

In a calm, but forceful and truthful manner, Mandela informed the visitor about the chief complaints of the prisoners. But he did so without bitterness or recriminations. The general duly took note of what he had to say, which amounted to a damning indictment of Badenhorst's regime. The following day Badenhorst went to Mandela and said, "I'm leaving the island. I just want to wish you people good luck."

The remark left Mandela dumbfounded.

Later he said, "I was amazed. He spoke these words like a human being, and showed a side of himself we had never seen before. I thanked him for his good wishes, and wished him luck in his own endeavours."

Mandela says that he thought about this incident for a long time afterwards. Badenhorst had perhaps been the most callous and barbaric commanding officer they had had on that island. But that incident revealed that there was another side to his nature, a side that had been obscured but that still existed.

And Mandela concludes, "It was a useful reminder that all people, even the most seemingly cold-blooded, have a core of decency, and that if their hearts are touched, they are capable of changing. Ultimately Badenhorst was not evil; his inhumanity had been foisted upon him by an inhuman system. He behaved like a brute because he was rewarded for brutish behaviour."

To confront another person is a difficult thing and calls for courage and wisdom. If we do it in anger and in a vengeful frame of mind, in all probability it will be counter-productive. We have to do it not just out of concern for ourselves and the hurt caused to **our** pride, but out of concern for the other person. It is a way of showing love for the other.

We don't show love for someone if we allow him to do wrong to us. By hurting us he is also damaging himself. It is in **his** interest too that he desist from what he is doing. Besides, to watch someone doing wrong, and not try to stop him, is to bear part of the responsibility for the wrong he is doing.

We are all responsible for one another, but the duty to speak out falls most heavily on the leaders in the community. But it is also the duty of every Christian. We should not remain silent when silence can be taken to approve of what is happening. In that case we share responsibility for the evil.

Ezekiel was called to be a watcher for the house of Israel. He speaks to them, not out of arrogance, but out of genuine humility and care for them.

If we confront the offender in the right spirit, and he is genuine, he will want to put it right. If not, he won't be able to plead ignorance, saying, "Why didn't you tell me?" The object is not to score a victory over our brother, but to win him over, to be reconciled with him. Perhaps the person is not aware of the extent to which he is hurting us.

In the response to the psalm we repeated the words: "O that today you would listen to his voice. Harden not your hearts." God is continually calling us from the error of our ways into a closer relationship with him and with one another. Heart to heart.