



5th Sunday Chinese New Year

Homily

**By the Most Rev Don Sproxton
Auxiliary Bishop of Perth**

Manning Parish, St Pius X Church
Sunday 10 February, 2019

New Years Day, that is the first of January, was a very special day in my family. In preparation, all the household bills needed to be paid before 31 December so that the debts would be cleared. Also, there was great anticipation about who should be the first visitor to pay a visit to the house. Whoever it was could bring great good fortune or bad luck for the year.

I am sure that these ideas came from our Scottish roots. New Years Day is in some way, more important to the Scots than Christmas! It is more ancient, going back to Celtic civilisation at least. We received and celebrated these little cultural traditions that have contributed to our sense of who we are and where we came from as a family.

The Lunar New Year celebrations give us the chance to honour the traditions which have come down to your families from a very old and distinguished Chinese culture. We acknowledge that this culture has received the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and as Jesus has been able to do for all cultures, the many good things of the Chinese culture have been highlighted and valued, and the cultural shadows have had a light shone on them and have been adapted. Christ has the power to transform every culture and make it more life giving and honourable.

Some of the superstitions of my culture have been shown up for what they are, and, with the help of our Christian faith, they have lost their power to frighten us. Some good practices in our culture have been reinforced, such as the timely clearing away of our debts for the sake of justice by the end of the old year, if possible.

I am grateful that once more I can join you in these New Year celebrations that are so important to the Chinese Catholic community. Each year, these celebrations are enhanced as I celebrate the Mass with you and your families because we, in this way, are inviting Jesus to continue to be part of our lives in the year ahead. The power of Christ, the only Saviour, is always there for us. He wants to be with us. He waits for us to invite him into our minds and hearts.

About 750 years before the birth of Jesus, the great Hebrew prophet Isaiah celebrated an important feast day with his community. He records what happened to him on that day in the book that he has left us.

The reading we have been given today comes from that book. He tells us about a mysterious vision he had as he celebrated that special day of the year in the Temple of Jerusalem. From where he stood, he got a glimpse into the very centre of the Temple, into the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest could enter on one day of the year.



He saw the enormous statues of the cherubim, winged heavenly spirits, whose wings stretched over the Ark of the Covenant, a chest where the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments were kept. The statues represented those awesome spirits who brought the fire to consume the sacrifices and who revealed the presence of God.

At that moment, Isaiah had a vision where he is invited by God to come into his presence. But he straight away becomes conscious of his weakness and smallness before God. This feeling of insignificance before the glory of God followed from him experiencing the total goodness and power of God in that moment.

Yet he is drawn to come close because, even though God is all powerful, Isaiah is given insight to know God's love for him and the whole creation. He experiences that love through recognising God as one who seeks our company. The prophet realises that the Holy and Good God wants to touch us in our very depths and make us whole and free. This is to be holy. His presence or his touch enables us to become the person we were created to be.

This is why Isaiah would see himself and the Hebrews as a holy people, a people set apart.

Yet he sees something else, something new. His people are set apart because they have experienced God, and somehow they will be able to bring every nation on earth to know God, his power and love, and to come to him without fear. Isaiah comes to this blinding truth and sees this as the real purpose of his people on earth. It would be over seven hundred years before the coming of the Hebrew, Jesus of Nazareth, who would show us how to approach God, his Father.

The New Year lies ahead of us. We could ask ourselves: what is God asking of us as Catholics, what is he asking of the Church, his People? What is our purpose? These are questions that Catholics across our nation are reflecting upon in the next two years for the Plenary Council. We are a Christian community in the midst of many others in Australia. What is God wanting us to do?

Isaiah points us in the right direction. We might not receive a mystical vision, but we do hear through the prophet that we are invited to approach God without fear, come to know him with the help of Jesus, and discover his love for us.

The apostles were privileged to have witnessed a miracle of Jesus before they had the courage to follow him. Later, they wanted to touch the Risen Jesus before they went on their mission. Will we be given a vision so grand, or see a miracle so spectacular? Maybe not, because God does not speak only in visions.

No. God usually reveals himself in the everyday experiences, in failure and suffering. Someone once wrote that it might have been more in keeping with the experience of Jesus if he had fished with the disciples all night and caught nothing, rather than come along in the morning and perform a miracle. Of course, Jesus did work the miracle of the great catch of fish and for this reason: we need to know that the Kingdom of God asserts itself and the power of sin has been overcome. With Jesus we are redeemed and can be saved.



But if we continue to read on in the Gospels, we find that the life and experience of Jesus showed that God speaks in everyday life, in the questions and confusion that life throws up, in our sufferings, and even in death itself.

What are we to do this year?

In our home, Australia, God has placed us in the midst of many people. Fewer of them know God or Jesus, the Son of God. The Catholic faithful, with their Christian brothers and sisters, are chosen to be the leaven and the salt in the midst of all these people. Our desire and openness to be transformed daily by the Holy Spirit and become a holy, distinct people of God will mean that the others will be able to see a different, perhaps new way of approaching life. We can become the leaven and salt for the world through the power of the Gospel, that improves and makes our society wholesome. As the salt and leaven in the midst of our fellow Australians, God's invitation to them may be heard through our living of our faith.

This year is given for God's people to shine. It is the Year of the Pig. The chubby face and large ears of the pig symbolise wealth. Let's pray for the well being of our families, both materially and spiritually. Let us become fat through the blessings of our good God, especially wealthy in the gifts of faith and spiritual insight, so that we may come to know God better, learn to love God better, and seek to draw those around us to God by our living each day with faith.