

HOMILY FOR SUNDAY 3RD MAY 2020

TEXTS: Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

When Richard Harris and Craig Challen were made Australians of the Year in 2019, most people would have agreed that they deserved the award for their heroic actions in the rescue of twelve boys and their assistant soccer coach from the Thom Luang Caves in Chiang Rai Province in Thailand. The boys, aged 11 – 16, were members of the Wild Boar soccer club, who went on an outing to the caves on 23rd June 2018. They became trapped by rising water about 4 kilometres from the cave mouth. The only way out of the cave was through hazardous, narrow water filled passages. None of the boys could swim, and with monsoon rains approaching there was only a narrow window of opportunity to try to save them.

A multi-national rescue force, that included over 100 divers, and a staggering 10,000 support personnel was assembled to try to save the boys. The extreme degree of difficulty that any rescue effort involved was all too tragically illustrated when one of the rescue divers died of asphyxiation on July 3 (another diver later died of an infection caught from the contaminated cave water). Harris, an anaesthetist, and Challen, a retired veterinarian, who were both experienced cave divers, played key roles in working out how to get the boys out of the caves. Harris, sedated the boys who were then masked and attached to oxygen tanks, and ferried through the caves by a relay of divers. Miraculously, all the boys and their assistant coach survived, but the rescue team barely got out of the caves before the monsoon rains completely engulfed the cave system on the 10th July.

Both Richard Harris and Craig Challen knew that they could very easily die in the rescue attempt, but both still volunteered and offered their expertise. That makes them, in my view, heroes.

I believe that anyone who willingly puts their own life in danger for the sake of others is a hero. This last summer we saw many heroes in the shape of CFA volunteers who faced up to the ferocious fire storms that engulfed Gippsland and many other parts of Eastern Australia. Several tragically died in fire truck accidents. Many other CFA members will be forever marked by the trauma of what they saw and what they had to deal with. They are heroes. As was Kirsty Boden, an Australian nurse, who during the terrorist attack on London Bridge in June 2017, she ran towards danger to help the injured. She was fatally stabbed as she tried to help a wounded man.

None of these people wanted to die, but they were all willing to put their lives on the line for the sake of others. Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” John 15:13

These heroes’ actions were truly courageous and self-sacrificial, and they were ultimate demonstrations of love in action. Most of us would struggle to emulate them, but we are so thankful for their courage and commitment.

But none the less, as Christians we are called to seek to live lives of commitment, courage, service and love following the example of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Jesus is our ultimate hero. For Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is caring, loving, courageous, self-sacrificial, patient, vigilant (against dangers to his flock), protective and fearless. Furthermore, his concern for his flock is personal- he knows them by name, and leads them. He does all this because he is devoted to living in true obedience to God’s law. We also know that Jesus willingly paid the ultimate price for this devotion in the form of a barbaric death on the cross, and that he was raised to life by God having conquered sin and death.

We understand that as Christians, we are part of Jesus’ flock. We are among those who he knows by name and loves. We, as part of his flock, are also among those whom he leads. Our calling is to be his faithful followers. As part of being his followers, we are called to emulate him. To emulate him in caring, loving, faithfulness, courage, vigilance (against evil and injustice), patience and self-sacrifice.

This may sound like a big ask, and there is no mistaking that it is a demanding calling, but we are not being asked to do it alone, nor to do more than we are capable of doing. For Jesus is with us to watch over us, to strengthen us, to encourage us, and to lead us.

There is an old Chinese Proverb that tells the story of a fox who was captured by a tiger.

The tiger was going to kill the fox, but the fox said to the tiger, "You can't eat me because the gods have made me the leader of all the animals."

The tiger did not believe the fox, but the fox said to him, "Follow me and see if any animal challenges me."

The tiger agreed to this and followed directly behind the fox as the fox walked through the forest. To the tiger's amazement it turned out to be exactly as the fox had said. Not a single animal they encountered challenged the fox. Instead every animal fled in sheer panic.

After several encounters the tiger finally agreed that the fox was the leader of all the animals and let him go.

The proverb teaches us that it is easy to remove obstacles that oppose us when we have a tiger behind us.

Jesus teaches us in the Gospel story, as does the writer of the 23rd Psalm, that it is God in Jesus walking with us, who overcomes that which might otherwise overwhelm us. His love reaches out to us- constantly, freely, graciously, genuinely, and reliably. He knows our needs, he knows our fears, he knows our weaknesses, and he knows our strengths. He wants to be the tiger at our shoulder, encouraging and leading us. We need to be willing to seek his help and willing to seek to be guided. We also need to be willing to accept our human frailty, because sometimes we will fail. But when we do fail, he will still love us, comfort us, encourage us and help us move on. When we are fearful, he will comfort us and strengthen us and guide us into hope.

Jesus is the Saviour of the world, but he is also our loving Good Shepherd who calls us by name and leads us forth into love and service. Thanks be to God.

Sandra Houghton April 2020

