



Homily for Mass for the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia

St Stephen's Cathedral, Brisbane

Archbishop Mark Coleridge

10 October 2021

Scripture: Wisdom 7:7-11; Hebrews 4:12-13; Mark 10:17-30

At the end of this extraordinary week, how do we feel? Weary and a bit ragged, because it was very hard work; relieved, even slightly surprised, because so much could have gone wrong; satisfied, because it has produced real fruit; grateful to God and to each other, because it has all been more gift than hard work; intrigued to see what happens between now and the second assembly in the middle of next year. It's been a marvel of technology; a mountain of superb work from so many, and a maelstrom of words, insights, feelings, convictions and resolutions all with deep respect for each other, even and perhaps especially when we disagreed. But above all it has been a monument to grace and faith – God's grace and the Church's faith in this fraught time.

In the decision to begin the journey of the Plenary Council, in all that has happened since then and in the assembly of this last week, we have sought to be wise – though not as the world is wise. We have sought to be wise with the wisdom of God, the wisdom that comes from on high. This is no abstract wisdom,

but in the Bible becomes a “she”. It is a wisdom that is not simply known and understood but a wisdom which is loved: “I loved her more than health and beauty”, we have heard, “I preferred her to the light”. It is a wisdom which takes flesh.

Christians have often seen this heavenly wisdom as the Holy Spirit, moving among us, entering the flesh of the Church and the flesh of our lives. Here in Australia we have put our faith in the fact that the Plenary Council was born of the Holy Spirit, who has accompanied and empowered us on the journey of these years and has shaped the work of this first assembly. Without the Holy Spirit there would be no Council. There may be a meeting but it would be no more than politics and ideology, the crude struggle for power. But in what we have experienced there has been much more, something more mysterious, something greater than Solomon (cf Matt 12:42).

The Holy Spirit is the breath of God which, according to Scripture, is the breath which becomes the word of God. In the beginning we first hear the breath of God moving over the dark waters of chaos (Gen 1:2). Then the breath hits the divine vocal chords and God speaks the word that brings all into being. God says, “Light!” and there is light (Gen 1:3). The darkness and chaos are transfigured, and we are on our way to Easter.

In time Christianity will come to identify this all-creating word with Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Like God’s wisdom, God’s word is not abstract. It takes flesh in a particular person, a particular time and place. But once Jesus rises from the dead it becomes a word for every person, time and place. Because the Holy Spirit has suffused the Plenary Council journey at every point and at every depth, so too the word of God has been everywhere in the process. It has been

alive and active, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, slipping into all the secret places, judging hidden emotions and thoughts.

It is the face of Christ that we have sought to see, his voice we have sought to hear as we have journeyed on the road together. That is why we have looked at each other with new eyes and listened to each other with new ears, believing that it is only in listening anew to each other that we will hear the Word of God, the voice of Christ, in new and powerful ways. And only once we have done that will we be free to allow the Word of God to take flesh in the life of the Church in new and powerful ways, not for the sake of the Church but for the sake of the world.

Through the journey of the Plenary Council and this week's assembly, the Word of God has come to us as a call, every bit as much as it did to the rich man in the Gospel we have heard. Rich he may be, but he is also a searcher, as we have been through this week. Hence the question he puts to Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He's looking for more; his question rises from a sense that this isn't enough. Wealth he has and he has also obeyed the commandments of the Torah; but a gnawing sense of dissatisfaction lingers.

We are told that Jesus looked at him and loved him. To say that Jesus loved him is vastly more than some vapid sentimentalism. It is the call – the call which answers the man's question. The wisdom of God which becomes the Word of God now becomes the love of God. The rich man is called to leave everything and to enter the infinite love if he wants to know the fullness of life. This love isn't abstract: it's standing right there in front of him. The decision to enter the love isn't abstract either: it will mean leaving all his former securities and following Jesus on the road. It will mean giving God not just something but everything.

We are told, however, that the man's face fell at the words of Jesus. He was unable or unwilling to enter the love; he said no to the call. He feared he would lose too much if he said yes, when in fact he would have gained everything he was seeking. "In her company", says the Sage, "all good things came to me, at her hands riches not to be numbered".

To all of this the man says no, and – we are told – he goes away sad. This is the sadness that always come when we say no to the call of Jesus, when we refuse to enter the love that is before us, fearing that we will lose too much. If there is a sadness in our heart or in the Church or in the world, this is the reason.

The opposite of this sadness is the joy of the Gospel given to those who say yes to the call, enter the love and follow Jesus wherever he leads. It's the joy of those who aren't afraid to leave behind even the things upon which their life has seemed to depend, knowing that in embracing the love they have found something "more than sceptres and thrones", compared to which "all gold is a pinch of sand".

The wisdom which becomes the word which becomes the love which becomes the joy: this is the way of the Plenary Council. The Council is the Holy Spirit drawing us beyond our fears into the love, so that we can find the answer to our questions, What must we do at this time and in this place to inherit eternal life? What must we do to share that life with all those to whom we are sent?

The answer to those questions is clearer now than it was in 2016 when the journey began, and it is clearer still at the end of this first assembly. But the journey is not over; the answer must grow clearer still. As we turn from this week, we look to the months till the second assembly where we will – please God – gather face-to-face in Sydney. Our discernment will continue intensely through the months of fermentation, so that the seeds sown in the first assembly may finally

bear fruit in the second assembly, equipping us well for the journey beyond the phase of the Council's celebration to the long phase of implementation of its Spirit-shaped decisions and decrees.

The facilitator of my small group at the assembly had been a midwife for many years, and at one point she likened what we were doing through the week to bringing a child to birth. The process is slow, painful and messy, but in the end it is wonderfully fruitful and joyful as the baby is born. Beyond the maelstrom of this week and all that lies ahead may the Church in Australia come to know the fruitfulness and joy which the Holy Spirit brings from all the pain and mess, because nothing is impossible for God. Amen.