

2018 26TH SUNDAY

Jesus is clearly using hyperbole in today's Gospel. Hyperbole is when we deliberately exaggerate to make an important point. Jesus' words, "It is better to be thrown into the sea with a huge stone around your neck so that you drown quickly, than to be a stumbling block to the faith of a person," are not to be taken literally. But they are to be taken seriously. The words graphically underline how grave the sin is if through our words or our actions we endanger a person's faith.

As a preacher I am very aware of my responsibility to preach sound theology. Everything I say when I stand before you must be in harmony with the teachings of Christ and of the Church. Nothing I say should damage your Faith in God.

I will always be grateful to a gentleman by the name of Paul who took me aside in the very early days of my priesthood after a Sunday Mass at the Cathedral. He confronted me over the subject matter of my Homily. And he was quite right to do so. I learnt a valuable lesson.

Somewhere I had heard an overly-smart person say that in his opinion what really happened at what he called 'the so-called miracle of the loaves and fishes' was that Jesus inspired the people to share the food they had brought with them. Surely, he said, the people would not have been silly enough to journey out into the desert without adequate food. It all sounded plausible to me. So I proceeded to preach on that theme.

Paul reminded me that what I had just preached went right against what saints and scholars had taught for the last two thousand years. The physical multiplication of the loaves and fish was highlighted in all four of the Gospels. And here I was- with the oil of priesthood still wet on my hands- trivialising one of Jesus' most important miracles!

I took what Paul had said to heart because he was right. As a priest I have a duty to preach in harmony with the Church's Tradition. The lectern at Mass is no place for speculative and suspect theological theories to be bandied about. The faithful have a right to know that when they come to Mass they will be taught sound doctrine. That day I had been showing off- trying to establish my credentials as an up-to-date scholar- and had taught falsehood to the faithful

at the Cathedral. I should have asked Paul for a large stone, tied it around my neck and gone down to the Waikato River- Splash! Glug! Glug!

In today's Gospel, Jesus focuses upon our duty not to be stumbling blocks to the faith of our 'little ones'.

If a young tree is vandalised, we are angered because the tree will never become the thing of beauty it was created to become. Likewise every child has a wonderful potential to become a person of great holiness but this will be thwarted if the child is vandalised by exposure to evil.

To be a stumbling block; to corrupt the morals of a young person, is a most heinous sin.

On the other hand, to be a stepping stone for a child, helping the child to love God and to love neighbour is the most worthy of all things we can do.

At every Baptism I always remind the parents and the relations that they have a huge responsibility towards their child. What sort of person the child will become is largely determined by the moral and religious climate of the child's home. If the child is treated with gentleness, generosity and forgiveness, the child will grow to be gentle, generous and forgiving. If the parents frequently talk with reverence of God, if they are people of prayer- there is every chance that the child will come to be a person of Faith.

It is a heinous sin to corrupt children by involving them in such terrible actions as drug-taking, sexual abuse, violence, blasphemy, lying or stealing. When we do this we are most certainly stumbling blocks for our children; leading them on a downwards spiral to Satan.

But conversely we are stepping stones to our children when we treat them with unconditional love, when we pray with them and bring them to Mass, when we support them in moments of doubt and weakness, when we boost their self-confidence, when we listen to them and understand them, when we forgive them and never mock them or put them down, They imitate us and we then become stepping stones leading them to eternal life.

Today's Gospel challenges me once again to ask myself: "In my preaching, am I a stepping stone for my people or am I a stumbling block?"

And there is a challenge for all of us: "To our children, our Grandchildren- are we stepping stones bringing them to Christ- or are we stumbling blocks?"

Lord, help us all- whatever our state of life is- to be stepping stones, not stumbling blocks to those we meet- but most especially for our children.

