

2020 5TH SUNDAY

I would like to speak to you of a moment in my life which shook me to my core. It was a profoundly good shaking- so relax, I am not about to launch into a horror story.

Soon after my Ordination to the priesthood I was lucky enough to win a raffle giving me a free round the world trip. One of my first places to visit was Philadelphia where several teaching colleagues from my days in American Samoa then lived. One very special colleague was Lucy. We had worked together for four years and had been really good friends.

We met in a coffee shop in mid Philadelphia. It was 10 years since I had last seen Lucy and we had not been in contact so I was looking forward to hearing all her news- perhaps there was a husband, perhaps children.

However Lucy told me that she had become a nun- a Medical Missionary Sister. OK that was a surprise- but not out of this world. In her days in American Samoa Lucy had been a daily Mass goer and was passionate about teaching Religious Education to the boys. It was clear to everyone that she really loved the Lord.

I then asked her what School she was teaching in. But she told me that hers was not a teaching Order. They were a nursing Order. Her work was to help run a drop-in centre right in the heart of Philadelphia where homeless men and women could come for help. She had a special room in the Centre where she tended the feet of the people living on the streets. She would gently take off their tattered shoes and filthy socks and bathe their feet. She would tend the sores and blisters, powder between the toes and help them put new socks on. She did this day after day.

I was profoundly moved. What love! As a priest I was empowered by the Church to act in the Person of Christ as I forgave people their sins and spoke those sacred words "This is My Body" at every Eucharist.

But Lucy *was* Christ as she lovingly cared for the homeless and destitute of Philadelphia.

Lucy is still a nun. These days she lives among the poorest of the poor in a City called Camden which apparently, is the most dangerous City in the US to live in and has, per population, the greatest number of homeless. I don't doubt

that Lucy is still gently tending to their feet, manifesting the love of Christ, quietly, humbly.

The prophet Isaiah writes so beautifully: “Share your bread with the hungry and shelter the homeless poor, clothe the person you see to be naked and your light will shine like the dawn.”

Pope Paul VI was surely thinking of Christians like Lucy when he wrote in his great Encyclical ‘Evangelisation in the Modern World’: “Through their wordless witness these Christians can stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live this way? What or Who is it that inspires them? Such a witness is a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one.”

As disciples of Jesus, our witness should lead others to wonder, to ask questions about the meaning of life. In her humble witness to absolute love, Lucy most certainly brought me to a sense of wonder.

I always delight in telling the story of Marcel and Suzy Fransen- wonderful parishioners in St. Columba’s Parish Frankton. When I was their Parish Priest 20 years ago, they and their children were heavily involved in all things Catholic in Hamilton. They had a small farm but Marcel was employed as a builder. He spent months single-handedly building a huge barn for his farm. Marcel and Suzy were tickled when they heard that their neighbours were calling the barn ‘The Church’.

And it was a reminder to them that as far as their neighbour were concerned Marcel, Suzy and family were the Catholic Church. It reminded them, too, that their neighbours had expectations of them. They probably looked out for them driving off to Mass on a Sunday morning and felt good about it. But they expected Marcel and Suzy to live out Gospel values. They would have felt mightily let down if Marcel and Suzy weren’t among the very first to pitch in and lend a hand with practical help and comfort in times of need.

Marcel and Suzy- and all of us- can’t have days off from being Catholics. Our neighbours know we are Catholics. In Our Lord’s words- we have to be constantly salty.

I thank God for the inspiration Lucy has been in my life. One cannot guess at the number of people, like me, that she has touched and brought to a deeper faith by the example of her Christ-like compassion. But I also thank

God for the Marcells and Suzys of our Parishes. In their dedication to Sunday Mass, in the hospitality and joy they manifest to their neighbours, in their obvious devotion to family life and down-to-earth goodness- their light shines out in the sight of people almost all of whom are hungry for inspiration and desperate for love.