The vineyard is producing sour grapes

Twenty seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

The readings of today tell us of a man carefully and lovingly cultivating a vineyard. Vineyards are beautiful things. We observe them up Coal River Valley and many other locations around Tasmania. With their neat rows rolling down the hillsides, full of leaf and grape in the height of summer, a vineyard is a thing of beauty.

They are cultivated with the expectation of a plentiful harvest and the production of fragrant wines. We are told in the readings that the owner of the vineyard prepared a wine press in expectation of reward for his labours.

The Gospel parable and the passage from the prophet Isaiah say that the results were not as expected. Sour grapes were the result in the first reading and violent rejection of the owner was the outcome in the Gospel parable.

The vineyard is the People of God, cultivated with so much devotion by the Lord.

As events have unfolded here in Tasmania during the campaign over redefining the meaning of marriage, there have been some very disturbing developments. The NO campaign was denied access to venue after venue in Hobart to hold a rally on Friday night. Finally, with the intervention of the Vice Chancellor of UTAS a lecture theatre was made available. Who could have imagined that our Australian society would have come to this: where those advocating for marriage as being between a man and a woman are denied the right to present their views.

Our society and our culture has its foundations in Christianity. Each year, as a nation, we celebrate Christmas and Easter as major public holidays. Christmas, in particular, is widely embraced as a significant family event and the Christian feast is surrounded by an array of cultural practices, like sending Christmas cards, singing carols, decorating our homes and suburbs in a festive way, and, of course, the giving and receiving of presents.

In Australia, our towns and cities are dotted by churches. So many towns and suburbs have a street named “church street”. Locations here in Tasmania are named after Christian saints or have biblical references: like St Helens, or Jericho River, St Patrick’s Pass or the Walls of Jerusalem. A large percentage of the poor, the sick and the elderly in our society are cared for by a great array of Christian institutions. Care of the needy has always been a hallmark of Christianity, and Christians pioneered care of the sick. Many young Tasmanians are educated in Christian schools, reflecting a Christian commitment to education for all, especially those socially disadvantaged.

Christianity is woven into the very fabric of our culture. We have grown up in a society shaped by Christianity, whether people have been actively involved with the churches or not. In the main, the churches have been respected, and their moral and spiritual contribution to society appreciated.

We are now witnessing a time of significant change. This current debate has revealed a depth of rejection and anger towards Christianity. Our belief about the nature of marriage as being between a man and a woman has become a defining moment. It has been attacked with surprising vehemence. Our efforts to proclaim this truth have become the subject of ridicule and even violence.

Laws designed to protect the vulnerable from unjust discrimination have been used to prevent the churches from professing what has been our society’s long held belief about marriage and family. Up to recent years, this understanding of the nature of marriage was never seriously questioned.

Now there is a fear in the hearts of ordinary, decent Australians about saying what they believe about marriage. They are frightened about being verbally abused, labelled a bigot or hater. They experience being ostracised among their friends and work colleagues. So they find themselves forced in silence, not daring to say what they believe about marriage. They feel isolated and vulnerable.

Freedoms, which we enjoyed and largely took for granted, are now under serious threat: freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion.

It saddens us all that our wonderful country has come to this. The carefree Australian character, the easy going acceptance of one another, the respect for difference, are now vanishing in the heat of this debate.

We have reached a decisive moment in our nation’s history. To deny the right of ordinary Australians to publically express their belief in God’s good plan for marriage and family is to seriously damage the health and freedom of our way of life.

The Christian faith lies at the heart of the lives of many Australians. This faith not only provides guidance and comfort throughout life, but also has contributed to so much of what is good in our society.

The virtues of service, of self-sacrifice, of humility and of generosity flow in the lives of Christians, inspired, as they are, by the example and teaching of our Saviour. They have immeasurably enriched the quality of life of our nation. In particular, they have helped fashion the character of children as they have grown up, enabling them to grow into mature human beings and good citizens.

Our defence of the traditional understanding of marriage and family is not just some doctrinal position, for we know that it is in the best interests of future generations. We want to help children in the future to have the best opportunities to grow to be healthy human beings.

To deny God’s good design for marriage and family is to threaten the quality of life for future generations. As Christians, we know that for best results we should follow the Maker’s instructions.

Our society is like a vineyard which has been cultivated by Christian faith and truth, yet now it seems only sour grapes are being produced and there are tenants who deny the rights of the owner.

As Christians we cannot avoid speaking of what we know is right; we cannot deny the evident truth; and we cannot simply go silent in the face of ridicule and persecution.

Archbishop Julian Porteous

Saturday, 7 October 2017