

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this year of 2021, perhaps more so than 2020, are we living through uncertain and anxious times. We are by no means through the pandemic, even as we might begin to see the plans in the making which are intended to return us all to the greater freedoms we enjoyed just a few short years ago – years which seem ages past. Who remembers their last overseas holiday or business trip? Or perhaps more relevantly, even a journey interstate? The things we took for granted as part of our sophisticated modern lifestyles, such as air travel, no quarantine, ease of movements, are long gone. How quickly everything can change. And when we are in the middle of a time like this it is very hard to imagine that life might ever be restored to normal.

During the pandemic we have seen anxiety and frustration in the community build up and sometimes explode, just as we witnessed this last week in public protests. These began in the construction industry in Victoria, and which have morphed into an excuse for anti-everything protests, hijacked by right wing extremists and professional demonstrators to create public mayhem. The scenes of angry protesters and violent actions, as well as the sometimes over aggressive response of the riot police are distressing for Australians. We are used to living in a comparatively peaceful nation. The scenes from Victoria belong to a different world – well, at least that is what we would like to think. The media doesn't help us have an unbiased response to the public actions. The media have many times misused their power throughout the pandemic to try and control how people think and how they behave.

I've been reflecting on these things during the week and what they mean in relation to the readings set for today, this festival of St Michael and All Angels. What strikes me most is division. The people are divided in Victoria, and around Australia as we all form opinions on the protesters' actions. From the Book of Revelation, we hear that even in heaven there has been division so severe that it resulted in war, fearsome, cosmic war shaking the foundations of creation as ancient evil erupted and rebelled against God. In

the war Michael the Archangel and his angels fought the ancient evil, stylised as a dragon or serpent, defeated it and its own host of angels and cast them to earth.

In the symbology of the Book of Revelation, the Devil or Satan is a code word for the Roman emperor. He was the evil force that manifested as a figure which drew the new Christians away from Christ, made them work for the gain of money and instilled greed and lust in them. John the prophet wrote Revelation according to a vision given to him by God. This John likely wrote the three letters of John in the bible, but not the gospel of John. John the prophet warned the people that the devil was upon earth and that woe would be among them. The devil was the accuser, who created division.

Division continues to this day. There is division within and among nations, within communities – including churches, and there is division in the structure of society. In the pandemic we have seen that there are rules for some and exemptions for others, and the logic or fairness that governs them is not always clear. Thus, the construction workers took to the streets in Victoria.

Visually, the construction workers, along with other hands-on trades, are set apart by their hi-vis safety vests and shirts. Do you remember the demonstrations by workers in France three years ago? These protests went on for many months and were characterised by the hi-vis yellow shirts worn by those on the streets. The hi-vis work wear became a symbol of solidarity and for action against authority. The yellow shirt action spread from France throughout Europe and into the Middle East.

This week in Melbourne we are seeing something similar happening. The workers in the industry have had enough. The pressure points have been pressed too hard and have boiled over into a fever of discontent and the desire to do something. Is it alright for people who work in comfortable offices to say that workers who are outside all day cannot use a lunchroom? The lunchroom has a fridge, a microwave, air conditioner when it is hot or cold, somewhere to sit down to eat. Maybe it is alright to dictate these things because we are in a pandemic, but then there are a lot of inconsistencies in rules

and it doesn't take much for people to believe they and their industry are being targeted, made scapegoats. The accusations are flying, creating more division. The subsequent action of protesters who have taken the cause far beyond the initial action have not helped their cause in the public eye.

My husband goes to work each day in a hands-on industry. He wears a hi-vis shirt as part of his work uniform. He doesn't strike me as the protesting type, but he is aware that his work wear distinguishes him from a person wearing pants and a business shirt. Do you remember the old 'blue collar/white collar' distinction that used to be used of workers? Blue collar workers wore blue shirts, jeans or dark pants, overalls, boiler suits. Women wore those horrible dress uniforms in the same colours. Blue collar work was manual, often dirty, physically hard and usually lower paid. The level of education required for the position was low. White collar workers on the other hand wore white shirts or blouses, ties, suits, sat at desks, had a clean work environment and higher pay. The level of education required for their position was usually high. The distinction between blue collar/white collar was frequently based in salary size and position stability. It was also used as a social status marker, indicating the class of a worker.

These days we don't use blue collar/white collar, because there is a saturation of people in the traditional white collar work force and frequent unemployment, along with the demise of many of the traditional blue collar jobs, and those that are left are better paid and need a higher education than they did previously. However, we do have hi-vis workers and non hi-vis workers. It's not the same distinction, but there are similarities. And perhaps it might still reveal a division in social strata.

Jesus lived most of his earthly life in Nazareth of Galilee. Nazareth didn't have a great reputation as a place to live. Nathanael was a teacher of Israel and he doubted that anything good could come from Nazareth. Nathanael displayed an attitude of class distinction, perhaps imagining a type of worker coming from that place, certainly not someone of worth. Philip's simple response, 'Come and see,' was an invitation for

Nathanael to shake of his presumptions of what people were like simply because of a social status label.

Most of you will know that I came from Elizabeth. I was born there and lived there until I was nineteen. I have also lived in Burnside and held a public position there when I was parish priest. One time while I was still living in Burnside, I took my son to a footy game in Elizabeth to see Centrals play Sturt. I was wearing a Centrals scarf and cheered them on through the game. Some of the behaviour of the Sturt supporters was appalling. They verbally abused the Centrals supporters around them as being dole bludgers, low income, housing trust, druggies – it went on for the whole game. I realised that wearing my Centrals scarf made me a target for abuse because people from outside thought that I and everyone else around me was like they imagined. I doubt those people would have been open enough to see that social labels do not indicate the worth or status of a person. They would not, like Nathanael been open enough to ‘Come and see’ just what else could thrive in areas of perceived impoverishment by people who have just the same potential as the next person.

Jesus might have belonged in a place like Elizabeth. Perhaps Nazareth was a bit like it. There used to be lots of blue collar workers living in Elizabeth, and these days probably a lot of hi-vis workers. Jesus broke down the distinctions between people, equalising them as his followers no matter where they came from, what class they belonged to or what work they did. Tax collectors, prostitutes, tanners, teachers, fisher people all alike followed him. And in the church that grew from the resurrection of Jesus there was to be no distinction between race, sex or class, no matter that division continued to be in the world and that people fell into war and conflict and continue to do so until this day. For Christians, it was to be another and better way. May we remember that Michael the Archangel fought in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to quell division and that he conquered the things that threatened to tear heaven itself apart. Let division no longer be among the people who recall Michael’s battle, but pray that we and all human society grow together to be united and strong.