Sermon.2025.07.13: Fifth after Pentecost 2025

Today I want to talk about Immanuel Kant, a German-speaking philosopher of the 18th century who lived in Königsberg – the city now known as Gdansk in Poland, but then is was part of the kingdom of Prussia. Kant had some unusual habits (his neighbours claimed they could set their clocks by the time he stepped out for his regular daily constitutional), and like many 18th century philosophers, he had some good ideas and some not so good ideas. One of his better ideas, in my opinion, was what he called the idea of the *par-ergon* – he gave it a fancy Greek name, as if to say I'm onto something here – sit up folks and take notice! The *ergon* is the work, and *par- ergon* just means what's beside the work, or if you like the framework, the thing that surrounds the work. Kant suggested that this thing around the work can be as important as the work itself; maybe even more important. It's a very simple idea, and one that can apply in lots of situations. A philosopher has to eat breakfast, so maybe the breakfast is as important as whatever the philosopher dreams up as his writing desk; maybe the person who prepares the breakfast is just as important as the ideas he's dreaming up.

But let's take another example. If you go to the National Gallery in St Kilda Road, go into the 18th century rooms and you'll see lots of paintings of important looking people all in their Sunday best, paintings with gold-leaf frames with lots of curlicues round the edges – as if the person in the painting is saying to you: 'I'm very

important and I have lots of money.' That's what the gold-leaf frame is saying to you. And next to the painting there'll be a landscape, also in a gold-leaf frame: 'oh by the way, this is my country estate in Buckinghamshire – it's very green and has lots of sheep and cattle – that's how I can afford to be a member of parliament and the local justice of the peace.' The frame actually tells you just as much as the painting itself. Now walk up St Kilda Road to Fed Square, the Australian section of the gallery. Here you'll see some similar paintings from the 19th Century, in similar gold frames and they convey a similar message. Here's my sheep run - all finest Western District merino.

Then walk to the Heidelberg school paintings, the more impressionist works from the late 19th century when Australian nationalism was just getting going. Here you get the same bush scenes, but the frames are completely different: they're made from bits of jarrah or red gum that still show the saw-marks, as if they were off-cuts from the mill or the bits that didn't get thrown into the boiler of the traction engine or the Murray River paddle steamer. Some of the frames are just chiselled-out blocks, all in one piece. These frames are saying: 'we're Australians here – we're not into those fancy home-county pretensions; and we're not even squatters with their big houses and their riding boots – we're ordinary Australians, working on bush blocks, and just to prove it, here's my painting of the bush, in the frame that I knocked together in the shed.

A very different message – or at least, a different set of pretensions. Because the paintings themselves are not amateur pieces; many of them are stunning in their vision of the Australian bush and in their technical artisanship; but the frames convey a different narrative. So thank you, Herr Professor Immanual Kant!

Now you may be asking yourself – what's all this got to do with anything? Well today's gospel tells us a parable – not just any parable, but the best-known parable of the lot; it's the parable that everyone knows, and everyone knows what it means. Right? Everyone knows about being a good Samaritan; there's even a Good Samaritan Act in Australian Law – which springs into effect when the stranger walking in front trips over the gutter and you instinctively bend over to help them up. I'm not going to talk about that!

But this is a *para - ble* – and the word itself (in the NT) is related to Immanuel Kant's *par-ergon* – it also has this idea embedded in it of a meaning that runs alongside (*para*-) the more obvious focus of attention. That should alert us that maybe – just maybe – there's more here than meets the eye. Even in the parable of the Good Samaritan!

In the word *para-bale*, in Greek, the *para*, the thing beside, is beside that thing that is thrown (*bale*), from which we get words like ball, as in football, or indeed, ballet, as in Swan Lake. So a parable is a story that's thrown into your lap as it were, but

which carries a meaning or a set of meanings that run alongside the story itself. And this is true even of a parable, like the Good Samaritan, the meaning of which we all know well.

The problem is, most of us, most of the time, just think of the story without taking into account the framework of the story, the setting of the story – which may tell us as much as the story itself, and may even be as important as the story itself. The framework in this case is just a few words, beginning and end:

> At the beginning: 'Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.'
>
> At the end: 'Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise".'

And in between the beginning and the end, a couple of fairly well-aimed caricatures of individuals a bit like this lawyer. The lawyer's whole intention is not to ask about how to inherit eternal life, not really; his whole intention is to test Jesus – to test his wisdom, his knowledge of the law, his personal integrity. That's what the lawyer is on about; and it's not even a real concern – it's playing a lawyer's game, trying to win an argument or prove a point: viz. this fellow doesn't know what he's talking about, and I'm going to show him up – in public.

So Jesus tells this story – in which two of the revered public authorities, a priest and a Levite, are shown to be lacking in basic compassion, basic decency. And it's then that Jesus turns to the lawyer who's asked the tricky question, and says to him – in effect: 'Now stop playing games; you asked about eternal life, life that's of ultimate

importance to us as human beings, and this is not a matter for logic chopping; not a matter of who can win an argument or big-note themselves in the public arena. So get real, get real about what's really important. The Samaritan was the one who understood the reality of that situation.

There is one other bit of the framework that I left out, and that is Jesus' return question to the lawyer:
'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He (the lawyer, that is) said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' So Jesus has actually managed to draw the correct answer from the layer himself: Jesus has, in other words, beaten this lawyer at his own game. He has persuaded him of the shallowness of what he'd been trying to do. And it's then, and only then, that he says: 'go and do likewise.'

The whole thing is an exposure of pretentiousness: it's the fable of the emperor's new clothes. But it's not just worldly pretentiousness – the emperor and his parade through the city; or the duke of Buckingshire and his grand estate. It's saying: inheriting eternal life is about what's real, and this is not something to play games with.