

Fr KEVIN DILLON'S HOMILY DATED 23.12.18

Over the years, language can change, words and phrases that have a certain meaning can move on and take on an additional meaning, maybe quite different from what it was originally, and sometimes that's the meaning that sort of takes over, and technology especially has done this. The word 'online' – now when I was growing up, that's what you put the washing on; you went out and put the washing on the line. We know what it means today. Similarly it took me while to, and this was a few years ago now, when the word came in for accessing the internet, somebody decided that they'd use the word, 'visit', and early in, say, radio or TV commercials, they'd say, "visit abcd.com.au". Visit? What does that mean? Got to go knock on their door or whatever, because, that's what 'visit' used to mean; still does, to a degree, but it's the technology that has taken over the whole meaning of the word in large degree. So that to 'visit', you don't visit someone, you visit a website, and something which has had, over the years, a very personal meaning becomes something very technological, as indeed the whole internet technological transformation has done with our society.

A few years ago, only a couple of years ago, I was in Sydney for a few days. I went for a walk, and I went past an open café, and four people sitting at a table having a coffee. They weren't talking. I think they were having their coffee but I took a photo of them, this is not one of them, but this is similar to what you get of what happens when people go out with one another these days. There's a couple of others like this too possibly. That's what happens at home and that's what happens when you're waiting for the train, and in large degree, we are buried in these things, and you can talk about being 'surrounded by a crowd but alone', but so often, it's the sense of personal engagement is maybe being lost a lot more readily than we realise, and as in some other thing, we probably won't know what we've got until it's gone. The whole sense of people visiting one another on a day just almost immediately before Christmas, the story of Mary visiting Elizabeth is a real case in point. Here, for her, for Mary, it was a journey that required considerable effort, considerable sacrifice, and considerable selflessness, because she had a lot to contend with; she was not only expecting a child herself, but she had been told that this child was to be the Saviour of the world.

That is a lot to get on board on all levels. None the less, she put all that aside and went to help out because she was needed. She didn't and couldn't send a text or an email, or even someone else. She took herself. It was truly a visit in the really important sense of the word, and Christmas is very much a visiting time. A couple of days out, it's not a bad idea for us to take stock and look at Elizabeth and that family visit that she made to her cousin, and think just how much that might be replicated to a degree for many of us in the next few days. It's always fascinating looking at cards on Christmas day. I know when in was in Geelong, by the time I got clear of the 11 o'clock mass and got myself organised and got in the car to try and come up to Melbourne, it was probably about half past one, quarter to two, and Geelong was deserted. The Princes highway was deserted. Get to Melbourne, it was deserted. It was only at around 5 o'clock that things started to get a little busy and one of the fascinating things, check it out in a couple of days and see if it's the same, don't know whether it used to be this way, it's probably the one day of the year where you will see most cars with several people in them.

It's very common on Christmas day to see 2, 3, 4, even 5 people or more in the one vehicle. You rarely see that during the rest of the week. We travel in large degree, on our own, and even if we are in a group sometimes, the radio's going or you're on the phone to someone else or whatever it might happen to be, but Christmas is a day in which we get together with family, with friends, with neighbours, and sometimes with people we can't abide at all and we haven't seen since last Christmas and thank goodness we haven't, and they're probably saying exactly the same thing. It's one of those things where you can choose your friends but you can't choose your family, but hopefully for most of us, family gatherings will be not only harmonious, but much better than that with a sense of real connection and recognition of what family truly means in the very best sense of the word. That said, it can be pretty stressful, and so the example of Mary, which was an example of selflessness, of generosity, of thinking of the other person, was something that we really should take on board, because we can well find ourselves in situations where we might say "I'm only doing this because I have to," and maybe that's true, but what do we convey?

What do we convey to that other person? Do we convey that sense of reluctance or 'I wish I was anywhere but here or whatever it might happen to be'. Being

a couple of days out from Christmas gives us a chance to prepare for the visitation that we might be doing to others or, in fact, others who are coming to us to share in our hospitality. The story of Elizabeth and Mary is one of grace and graciousness, and if we can, as best we can, within the limits of human nature, human relationships and human history, which is often the case in point, to try and make the visitations that we will be part of at Christmas, something which at least is not lightyears away from the example of Mary and Elizabeth. One thing which maybe stands out and which is there as a bit of an example there for us, and again we've got a couple of days to think about it and doesn't have to be done on Christmas day itself, but a lot of people do do these things, they will knock on the door, ring on the bell, maybe even tap on the window of people, and if you remember that song, you are very old indeed, of people where the connection is not necessarily a deep emotional connection, it's the connection of the sense of helping, of being needed.

Sure Elizabeth was Mary's cousin, but she needed help and Mary, despite her own issues that she had to work through, was there to give her that help, not just for five minutes, but in fact, for three months, and that's a visitation all of its own. So, who might there be in your life, and I'm thinking of in mine as well, where a knock on the door, a ring on the bell or tap on the window might make an enormous positive difference to their life? Who might there be where out of friendship, out of a sense of need, out of a sense of having something to offer, we might do a little visitation? We don't have to walk, we don't have to make a long journey, we don't have to stay for three months, but maybe it is someone across the other side of town, and maybe it can't be done on Christmas day, but maybe sometime across this week where there's a little bit of flexibility; we got a cousin who has a bereavement in the year and she's going to be on her own but she lives at St Auburns, and that's a long way away; well it is you're walking, but it's not too bad if you've got four wheels and if you've got an e-tag as well, that probably helps as well.

Maybe it's a bit further from going down the road to Scoresby or Clayton, but that effort represents so much and it might be so valued by that person. A little project we could all take on board would be who might be my visitation for Christmas 2018? Who is the Elizabeth to whom I can be Mary, coming out of a sense of care and love and selflessness? If we can find one person to do a special "visitation" then maybe we found very much the very heart of what this feast of Christmas truly represents.