

## Fr Kevin Dillon's HOMILY DATED 02.05.2021

During the lockdown last year there was a bit of publicity about the fact that somehow, I'm not quite sure how he got here or how he got home or whether he quarantined or whatever, but the Irish actor Liam Neeson somehow was in Australia for the filming of a new movie called "Taken 6". Liam Neeson's been around for a quite a while – he's a very good actor, usually in action roles these days as a retired CIA agent or something like that. About 25 years ago he appeared in the movie called "Michael Collins" which is the story of an Irish patriot during the 1917 uprising who at one stage for a few months before he was assassinated, was the leader of the emerging Irish state – roughly a bit of a picture of what was happening. I thought of him during the week because *the* other Michael Collins was in the news and maybe Liam Neeson might play him one day, although he's probably in his 60's now. Michael Collins was a lot younger when he came to prominence because Michael Collins was the pilot of the command module of the Apollo 11 with the moon landing. We can see here the picture of the command module on which Michael Collins was – waiting for the other two astronauts, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin. There's another shot that he took and that's an amazing picture that Michael Collins took of the moon landing craft heading toward the moon surface with the Earth in the background. Quite an extraordinary picture when you think of it, and you've got almost an eclipse of the Earth in that situation, the shadow.

He passed away during the week. Certainly, all the accolades and tributes indicate that he was in fact an extremely fine man of principles and one of great integrity. But he was once described as the loneliest man in the world, not the loneliest man on Earth. When he was the loneliest man in the world he was on the other side of the moon. He made a statement at one stage that there were so many billion people on one side of the moon and only one person on the other. And that was him. He didn't want to be known as the loneliest person in the world. He said "I wasn't lonely. I was alone" and he said, "there's a big difference between the two". And maybe in a world in which we are, certainly up until last year, so connected, whether it's through Skype, Zoom, phones, Facetime, or any other number of connections, we can always be connected with other people even if we are physically just in the one place and not surrounded by others. But our social life is enormous these days and, in many ways, maybe we've forgotten what it is to be alone, so that when we are alone, we can't handle it and that's what makes us lonely.

All of that comes into place in large degree with the Gospel today where Jesus talks about pruning the vine. Now, in terms of the study of gardening and trees and all that sort of thing, I am utterly useless, and I admit it. But I can observe things and I can remember a few years ago – a couple of years before I came here to Rowville, there was a section of trees in the carpark at St Mary's in Geelong where I was, and they were those plane trees – the ones that drop all their leaves and they get very crinkly during the winter and it's always a bit of a nuisance how to get rid of them. In the old days you used to burn them in the gutter. We're not allowed to do that anymore. And so these trees were pruned one day and the fellow who'd been employed to do it – did he prune them! He came by and he really cut loose. They looked absolutely shocking. They looked absolutely, totally stark. And I thought "what's going to happen? This is going to take years for them to grow back".

Guess what? It was about two months before they started to sprout new branches and in about three – four months the whole tree was covered again. So, the pruner knew what he was doing. He knew just how much to cut and what was going to come as a result.

It's an analogy of course that Jesus used. He probably knew a lot more about pruning and that sort of thing than I'll ever know, but He was spot on in terms of recognising the experience of life – not just when things go wrong – sometimes people interpret pruning in the Gospel as meaning that mistakes are made, and we learn from them. Yes, we do. And corrections are made, and we learn from that. Yes, we do. And things go wrong, and we learn from that. Yes, we do. But sometimes we can be pruned simply in a similar way (not that we can go to the other side of the moon), but finding for ourselves, space, in the sense not of outer space, but just in the sense of room to be with ourselves and within the context of our faith, with the Lord. That things have somehow got the

chance to fit better into proportion. But we are so busy. We have so many demands on us from others. We make many internal demands on ourselves and we never have time to be alone.

Being lonely is another story altogether but we don't have to be lonely if we are alone. In fact, being alone can make us more appreciative of others, can make us more aware of the hazards of life as they might be, and can make us take on board our life in a better perspective.

Michael Collins said of his time up in the space module – the other two, Armstrong and Aldrin, I wouldn't say were having the time of their lives, but in a way they were, certainly never to be forgotten going around the moon, and all the time hoping he was doing his job, because he was driving the bus that was going to pick them up. And that's what he did very successful and that's why all three of them were able to return to Earth safely after that extraordinary journey in July 1969. But the role that he had to play was something that had a profound effect on his life. Part of that was not just what he had to do, but he knew that that aloneness was not just something to be horrified about or to be rejected or resisted. It was something that gave him a sense of focus about what his job was going to be. And I wonder, if we look back at that 52 years event, if we have in fact become so busy that we have so little time to be alone? So little opportunity to be alone. No wonder life can get out of perspective. Everybody has access to us, and we have access to everybody else like never before in the history of the world. Is that a good thing? Maybe, maybe not.

Interesting reflection on the lockdown. I heard a while back a discussion on the radio about the lockdown and people working from home. And something like this topic came up in the whole thing in terms of saying before the lockdown people had a variety of situations and they would go off to work and be with other people. They would drive to work maybe (notwithstanding the frustration of being in peak traffic), they were to a degree, alone. They could choose to turn off the radio and not listen to the breakfast news programs or whatever if they wanted to do so. And just be there – on their own, in the car, and the same on the way home. When you're working from home that doesn't happen.

And back at the Gospel, that aloneness is an important part of our being pruned. Of our being cut back from the things that don't matter; the branches in our life that might be good at the time but aren't really essential to our way of life, and if we step back from them, maybe we see life and live life in a better way. In a way which is much more productive in the long run. Like those plane trees that I saw in a very short time were back in full growth and looked absolutely magnificent – far quicker than I would have ever thought possible.

So maybe there's a bit of a challenge for us to think "when do I ever find time to be alone?" Not in a sense of how horrible that might be, but in the sense of how worthwhile and productive that might be. Like Michael Collins on the other side of the moon, alone with ourselves and alone with God.

Sure, over many years people have valued the opportunity to call into a church and say some prayers, and maybe find a quiet little corner somewhere. And again, with Covid that hasn't been as simple and as easy as it has been. So many churches have been locked and for the first time in my life I've had a church that was not open to people pretty much of the time at least during the day – even though there are many churches that have been locked anyway. But they have been a great source of people being able to do that – to find a friendly, comforting and worthwhile alone place to be. Hopefully we'll get back in the not-too-distant future, to be able to be doing that within the context of our faith expression and in our church and churches.

In the meantime, the value of being pruned in our aloneness and not being lonely, is something that maybe we can explore. And maybe just today we can think about "can I find some space" (no pun intended) "in my life to be able to be genuinely alone?" Not isolated and lonely, but just simply alone in myself, seeing my life in perspective and seeing my place in God. And hopefully God's place in me.

So, the death of Michael Collins I think has got something to really say to us. The fact that on the other side of the moon, he was not the loneliest man in the world, but he knew he was totally alone and for the rest of his life it made a profound and very positive difference.