

Australia's tourism industry is reeling with the impacts of the summer's bushfires and COVID-19 restrictions, with warnings domestic tourism may not fill the void left by foreign tourists. Tourism Australia is urging Australians to support local tourism. The current crisis is in a way forcing us to remain within Australia. Well, I received an email from my airline informing me that my tickets are cancelled, meaning that I won't be able to visit mum this year. I haven't told her this yet, and I hope while watching this mass on video, my niece translates this properly to her. I will have a lot of explaining to do later.

Holidays are an important and integral part of our Australian way of life and usually it involves going somewhere else. As a young boy, growing up in a coastal village, going on holidays was not part of my childhood. Summer school holidays meant more time on the beach of our village, having fun in the sea. The most we got was to visit our relatives in neighbouring town. Pilgrimages to St Anthony's shrine or Marian shrines were a lot of fun as it was an occasion to eat some colourful sweets and receive new toys. An overnight stay with a shared communal meal and sleeping under the stars after spectacular fireworks was always the highlight.

These days, I still continue the practice of going on pilgrimages but I see things differently. I believe that my faith is challenged and strengthened. The last time I was in Veilankanni, a very popular Marian shrine for miraculous healing through Mary, I had a very special encounter. When I came out after having finished celebrating the 10 o'clock mass in the shrine, a young mother met me at the entrance of the church asking me to bless her 8 year old son who was very ill. I wanted to know more about the child and so began to talk to her. She told me that she was from a town about 200 kilometres away and her son was affected by this rare illness. After spending a fortune on many doctors and hospitals, she then turned to a fulltime carer, leaving her job. Being a Hindu, in a small village, it was not easy for her to openly come to a Christian pilgrim centre, but she was willing to do anything for the sake of her son after a neighbour told her of the miraculous healing power of God through Mary at this shrine.

In today's Gospel we hear of a woman who comes across as one of the most attractive characters in the pages of the Gospel: A pagan woman comes to him, hoping that he will have mercy on her and heal her daughter. Matthew calls her a Canaanite – the name given to the older inhabitants of Israel who were dispossessed by the Hebrews. This woman symbolises all those who are regarded as unclean by Jesus' own people.

She is a mother who is tormented by the suffering of her daughter, a woman who takes to the streets to make her plea to Jesus, who refuses to take his silence for the last word, who organises a one-woman protest in the path of these runaway men. She is the only person in the Gospels who has the wit to outwit Jesus. And in the end, she gets what she wants.

The silence of Jesus suggests a refusal to minister to this woman's needs. This is how the disciples interpret it, and they plead with Jesus to do them a favour by getting rid of this mobile nuisance who is screaming after them. Jesus explains his exclusive mission: he is sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. This woman, therefore, is not his problem. She is outside the territory of his pastoral concern.

The woman, however, has no intention of listening to these theological niceties which leave her out in the cold and abandon her daughter to a life of torment. She stops Jesus in his tracks by kneeling at his feet. "Lord," she says, "help me." Jesus responds by telling a harsh parable, one which voices his own people's traditional attitude to the likes of this woman: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the house-dogs." Only Jews have a right to be treated as "children" of God; the Gentiles, like this woman, are "dogs".

The woman is not diverted by this offensive rebuff; rather than getting into a scrap about Jewish-pagan relations, she hangs on to the reason why she is there. She keeps fighting for her daughter. She is consumed by her love for her child and nothing can withstand, not even the theology of Jesus. In her response she has outwitted Jesus in a way that none of his learned opponents ever managed, and he has the grace to give in. The woman gets what she came for: her daughter is healed. The desperate courage of this mother who was willing to go through anything changed Jesus. Seeing her great love, he did what his own love demanded; he healed her daughter. As the love of God personified, Jesus then takes up his cross for the love of us.

Love overcomes everything and has the power to change everything.

It carries hurts in the hope to make healing possible. These days we see this love being displayed in many ways. I hear of sons and daughters who would go out of their way to keep an eye for their parents, delivering groceries and care. Parents working from home...juggling work and education of their children... sacrificing everything for the sake of their children...

Grandparents learning new ways of communication, learning technology which some had resisted for a long time.

Love is everywhere and it is transforming us all. It changed Jesus and it has the power to change you and me. And transformed by love we can be the signs of God's love in our world.