

HOMILY 19th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2021
FEAST OF SAINT MARY MacKILLOP OF THE CROSS
Matt 6.25-34 1Kings 17.8-16 Col 3.12-17

After it was welcome back again, after our 5th hard lockdown, but now, like *Groundhog Day*, it's welcome back on-line for our 6th lockdown, but I guess at least it's not a total lockup, in that we can still get out within a 5km radius to 'smell the roses', and appreciate the natural beauty of the world around us in our local environment, as today's Gospel reminds us.

So much for the best laid plans! I was going to talk to Preps on Friday and finish off First Reconciliations with Grade 3's, do Baptisms on Sunday and bless a plaque with a family in the Memorial Garden, apart from the usual weekend Masses, focussed on Mary MacKillop, our first Australian saint. Well, we can still talk about her and learn from her faith and determination, particularly in the face of hostility from the hierarchy of her day, to the extent that she was excommunicated for a time, but fortunately, when on the outer fringes found a friendly Jesuit priest to provide her with spiritual sustenance with Eucharist, encouragement, moral support and understanding.

All we can be certain of at the moment is the uncertainty of what comes next! Meanwhile, I've had my second jab with AstraZeneca (with no side-effects at all), and I hope we're all moving in that same direction, as vaccination is the main way forward to opening up in a safer environment.

Meanwhile, painful as it is, we need to continue to take the necessary precautions of physical distancing, masking up and observing the ongoing restrictions and limitations to movement and social engagement.

As we move to Matthew's Gospel for today, it's worth noting that this is at the heart of Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom, which is not to be seen as a remote and ideal goal at the end of one's life, but rather a scenario which is to be lived and implemented here and now in the lives of his disciples. This is at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, starting with the Beatitudes, as the charter for Christian life, the positive attitudes which are to be applied in the lives of believers.

There's no denying that human physical needs must be met, before a spiritual dimension has meaning in life. Remember that with the feeding of the masses, in all 4 Gospels, Jesus first acknowledges that the tired, hungry, thirsty, and perhaps cold, crowd need physical sustenance, rest and warmth. Only then does he reflect on the spiritual dimensions of the Bread of Life, which we celebrate with Eucharist.

And now, today, we get a lovely reflection on the wonder and beauty of nature, in the images Jesus provides of the flowers of the field, and the freedom of the birds of the air. It seems to me a pretty clear call to look around and reflect, something this time has given us the opportunity to do, with the normal hustle and bustle of daily life somewhat restricted.

As time goes by, one thing I've appreciated more is the wonder of the natural world around us. I regularly post my iPhone photos on *FaceBook*, and the most 'Like' responses recently were to a lovely, but simple photo, of the rapidly appearing yellow wattle, as springtime approaches. Then there is the rapid sprouting of colourful flowers on the magnolia tree right in my front garden, and the roses fast emerging from the bushes that Brian has planted only recently. And then there is the diversity of birdlife all around, if we stop to look and listen. Once again Jesus takes simple images from the world around us, to make us reflect and appreciate.

It's all very well for Jesus to say not to worry about our day to day concerns, because we do, and need to, as we can't just ignore our normal responsibilities, to ourselves and to others. Basic needs have to be provided for. It is more that he is telling us to see the bigger picture of the world around us, as well, and not to just get bogged down in routine.

Of course, this is not to idealize a perfect world, given the reality of nature's dangers as well, with floods, fires, famines and other natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and the like (*although we are fortunate to be sitting on the world's most stable and ancient land mass here in Australia!*). It's a reminder, however, that we live in a fragile world, which must be respected and protected by those who occupy it.

God's Kingdom is here and now, but not yet fully, as Jesus reminds us that you and I are responsible for realizing its presence and responding to his call to be people of justice and peace as his followers. The Jerome Biblical Commentary suggests that this teaching is a combination of Wisdom theology and eschatology, whereby ethical behaviour should flow directly from this awareness.

Paul, in a poignant reminder to the Colossians today, speaks of the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. He then moves to the need for tolerance in diversity, forgiveness and then, over all is the call to love and peace and gratitude. It's a lovely, concise summation of how the Christian should live in community and bring harmony and understanding to all concerned. No-one can question that this expresses Jesus' teaching at its core.

This is where Mary MacKillop's story is applicable to today's readings. Her life (1842-1909) reflects a faith lived out in very practical ways, where her appreciation of the Gospel is demonstrated in her concern to educate young people deprived of the opportunity. She identified a need and responded, against all odds, of an authoritarian bishop who abused his power, in applying the blunt weapon of excommunication, in order to try and assert his power and control over her.

One of her amazing feats is the way she, like Saint Paul, hit the road, and the sea (*with no aerial assistance from 747's, A380's, 777's or 787's!*), to get out there and at it, to effect change, and inform and encourage those who could help her make a difference, as she saw necessary. Born in Fitzroy in Melbourne, she moved to Penola (South Australia), where she started teaching the needy, then Portland (Victoria), back to Penola, working with priest-scientist Julian Tenison-Woods, founded the Josephite Order in 1866, moved to Adelaide (SA), then Brisbane (Queensland), Port Augusta (SA), Rome (1873 – for approval of the Order, which took till 1886!! Rome doesn't rush things!), New South Wales and New Zealand, and finally Sydney in 1883, her base for further travels in NSW, Victoria, South Australia and NZ, ending up in North Sydney.

To quote Brendan Byrne SJ, in his tribute to her: *“She was acutely conscious of the needs of the people about her – for basic education, for care, for food. She dedicated her life to doing something about those needs, heroically and most effectively. But inspiring it all and sustaining it all was the vision of God she learned from scriptural passages such as today's Gospel, projecting not just material help and opportunity, but the sense that each person is precious in God's eyes, is loved by God, and therefore is to be valued and given dignity.”*

One of her simplest and best lines was: **“Do not see a need and do nothing about it.”** And she didn't just say it; she did it! If anyone is to be named a saint, it might as well be Mary MacKillop, a Gospel role model for all.

john hannon

8th August 2021