

Mary MacKillop – Feast Day 8th August 2020

Mary MacKillop Memorial Chapel – 10am

**Homily: Chaplain to Mary MacKillop Memorial Chapel, Fr Mark
McGuigan**

Greetings from the tomb of Saint Mary of the Cross to all participating in this Feast Day Mass.

Many of you are participating in the manner of electronic transmission which Mary MacKillop could not have imagined!

How different are the circumstances we find ourselves in today from those in which we gathered last year!

Since we gathered this time last year, we have seen the difficult conditions of drought on our land and its people; in parts of our community people have experienced flood and storms; we have witnessed the destruction of bushfires on lives and property; more recently we have felt the anxiety of the threat to our lives and society that the pandemic of COVID imposes.

These things have taken their toll. Some have lost loved ones due to fire and flood, others have experienced a sense of helplessness as they watched the decline of family or friends affected by the virus. Many are in the ongoing work of rebuilding their lives following the losses occasioned by bush fires. Others are living with the uncertainty of future employment and income.

These are the experiences we bring to this Mass as we remember the life and witness of a woman who lived through similar events in her own life and the lives of those she served.

Our first reading today refers to one of those experiences.

The effects of the drought reach Elijah as the stream which provided him with water dries up. But it is not a sign of God withdrawing his providence; rather it is a sign that a new stage in the story is about to unfold.

God tells Elijah now to go to the town of Zarephath in the gentile region of Sidon. Elijah must have found it a strange command, but he put his trust in the Lord and went. This whole story is about trust in God's providence and care. As we listen to this story, we see a premonition of another woman, Mary MacKillop who will live her life with faith and trust in the word of God.

Elijah receives a promise that he will be looked after there not now by birds but by a poor widow, herself on the point of starvation. Moreover, she is a Gentile, in Jewish eyes an outsider. Just one more example of how God's people were sustained by people they despised and avoided. Elijah, as the bearer of God's word, was now to be sustained by human hands, but they were the hands of a poor widow facing starvation.

Once again, showing his deep trust in God's care of him, Elijah goes off and, as promised, finds the widow gathering sticks. He asks for a little water to drink and she goes off to get some for him. However, as she is leaving, Elijah also asks for a little bread to eat. Here she demurs.

She told him that she had only a very small amount of flour in her house and a little oil. She was now gathering firewood to prepare a final meal for herself and her son. After that, with nothing more to eat, they were prepared to face death.

"Do not be afraid," said Elijah – a phrase that comes up again and again in both the Old and New Testaments and often used by Jesus himself.

Elijah then cites to her a promise from the Lord: she will not want for flour or oil until the day the rains return. In a marvellous act of trust she agrees.

The truth of Elijah's promise was soon confirmed for the widow. For the jar of meal and jug of oil were never again empty for one whole year. By her act

of faith the woman received the promised blessing, and in the midst of a pagan kingdom a widow realises that the trustful obedience to the word of God is the way that leads to life.

The whole story is a teaching about trusting in God's care for us. Later, in his home town of Nazareth, Jesus will use the example of this Gentile woman as an example of Gentiles having more faith than God's own people. Jesus was not able to heal many in Nazareth because of their refusal to see in him anyone but one of their neighbours.

This story reminds us too that the secret of life is for everyone to share generously of what they have. When that happens, no one is in want. When everyone gives, everyone gets.

As we listen to the story of this woman who trusted in the word of God we see an image of a woman who, many centuries later, will do likewise: Mary MacKillop. From her encounter with God in regular prayer, and her attentive ear to God's word, Mary MacKillop was able to live her life in a deep trust that the "jar of meal will not be spent, the jug of oil will not be emptied" while ever they are being given in the service of others in response to God's call to love and service.

Commentary on Col 3:12-17

In our second reading Paul makes some beautiful statements on the kind of people the Christians should be.

Paul tells us that the Colossians are "the chosen of God, the holy people whom he loves" and, because of that, they are to be clothed in compassion, generosity, humility, gentleness and patience. When they "put on" Christ at their baptism, all these qualities also needed to be part of what they "wore".

Israel were the original Chosen People but now the Christian community shares this name. Being chosen by God is a constant theme in Paul's letter

but the Scriptures never teach that our being chosen frees us from being responsible for our behaviour. We will not be saved against our will.

On the contrary, as Paul says here, it is precisely because Christians have been chosen for eternal salvation that they must exert every effort (with God's grace) to live a life in harmony with example set by Christ.

Christians, by their lifestyle, are called to act as a counter-witness to the prevailing values of most societies – the salt of the earth, the leaven in the dough.

Frictions, divisions and disunity can never be totally avoided but Paul says they must be dealt with by a high level of tolerance and acceptance of others and a readiness for forgiveness and reconciliation. The reason is simple: "The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same." The Gospel has much to say on this – Peter being told to forgive 70 times 7 times and the parable of the unforgiving servant; the command to love our enemies, to pray for them and bless them...

And so, the most important, the all-enveloping article of clothing must be love, "the perfect bond". Love is the central commandment. The "new" commandment is that we love each other as Christ has loved us and the greatest love is to give one's life for one's friends. With this in place, everything else – absolutely everything else – is taken care of.

If all this is done, then the next prayer is likely to become a reality: "May the peace of Christ reign in your hearts, because it was for this that you were called together in one Body." Once we are totally united with Christ and his way of living, then we are where we belong, we are responding to the deepest needs of our being – the result can only be a sense of inner peace and harmony, even if all round us there are storms. Tomorrow at Mass we will read the account of the disciples' boat in a stormy sea - surely the meaning of the story is just that - with Jesus in the boat there came a great calm.

Mary experienced this in her life. In 1907 Mary wrote of her encounter with God in Prayer in these words:

“When storms rage, when persecutions or dangers threaten, I quietly creep into the deep abyss of God’s Heart; and securely sheltered there, my soul is at peace.”

And when that peace comes, let us also be thankful. Gratitude is a sentiment that must surface constantly in the Christian heart as gifts are piled on us one after the other, beginning with the very gift of life and the gift of the Good News about Jesus. Our most important act together is the celebration of the Eucharist: a word which means ‘thanks’.

In the final part of the reading, Paul speaks about how the Colossians should pray and worship together:

- *Let the Word of Christ, in all its richness, find a home in you.*
- *Teach each other, and advise each other, in all wisdom.*
- *With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs to God.*

So there are two short prayers we might make at the beginning of every day:

- “Grant, Lord, that all my thoughts, words, actions and responses may be directed solely to your love and service this day” and
- “Help me, Lord, to seek, to find and to respond to you in every person and in every experience of this day.”

The widow in the first reading lived in drought, her life and that of her son were in danger. She acted in trust on the word of God and lived in hope.

Mary MacKillop lived in a similar manner, acting in trust on the Word of God as she faced the realities of the Australian climate, fire, flood, bubonic

plague, financial uncertainty, and the pain that comes from loss, misunderstanding and hostility. Mary wrote:

“When I could not see my way God kept my heart full of trust.” 1874

Mary MacKillop’s manner in dealing with the challenges of her times offers us inspiration and hope in our own times.

Saint Mary of the Cross, lived with faith and courage. She was a resilient and tenacious woman who had a deep trust that God would provide the wisdom and means so long as Mary was engaged in doing God’s will in her life.

As we face the challenges of our time, may we do so with similar faith, trust and hope as the widow in Elijah’s time and with which Mary MacKillop faced the challenges of her time.

As we mark this 111th anniversary of Mary’s death, may we take to heart Mary’s words written in her last letter to the Sisters in the final year of her life:

“Whatever your troubles may be before you, accept them cheerfully, remembering whom you are trying to follow. Do not be afraid. Love one another, bear with one another, and let charity guide you in all your life.”

12th January 1909