

HOMILY FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT 2019

CRITICAL SITUATION OF THE CHURCH IN MELBOURNE

On Friday night, in a speech to mark St Patrick's Day, delivered to leaders in Catholic education, Archbishop Comensoli outlined his developing vision for us who are the living stones of the Melbourne church.

He admitted to 'being wounded, but proud; shaken but determined' in the wake of the 'earthquake' that has occurred.

He recalled that 'Catholic presence has been an influencer in the city, a marshaller of the troops, a political force for good'. But on Friday night he stood up 'amid the darkest days of our proud history in this city' during which a permanent shift of the landscape has happened.

He states the impossibility of going back to familiar territory and called for new ground to be prepared. He acknowledged that we firmly say 'yes' to receive a fair share of funding and facilities. But he called for a "'yes' to being formed anew, free and faithful in Christ".

Like St Patrick did seventeen centuries ago, we need to 're-plant the seeds of the Gospel, re-discovering a knowledge, language and pedagogy that can transform lives'. In a foreboding turn of phrase, he said that 'what has been a source of pride and comfort ... no longer captures people's minds and hearts, and leaves our children indifferent'.

Please permit me to interpret this call to rediscover the knowledge, language and pedagogy that can transform our lives. Surely the knowledge that we transmit must be on fire with the living word of God in the holy scriptures rather than weighed down with theology that was effective centuries ago. Nor need we persist with changeable human traditions that have become ineffective, provided changes are properly weighed up. Our language needs to be clear and simple, truthful and persuasive. Pope Francis says in clear terms what his predecessors said with great learning. The truths and insights are identical. Our pedagogy needs to be contemporary in a process in which learners sit with equal dignity alongside sure guides.

Our archbishop appeals to us to join him 'at this time of deep crisis and humiliation, ... to let go of the past and begin anew'.

Patrick, he said, "carried with him a 'deep magic' by which people find meaning to their questions. ... He carried with him a fire to light the way." The archbishop has not yet viewed the right hand door of our church, which shows Patrick tending a blazing fire.

FAITH

Faith is a blazing fire that can scorch the debris of the earthquake that we have endured.

Faith of Abraham

Abraham had a dream common to all nomads, the dream of a fertile place in which to settle with the clan. Abraham had neither a settled place nor a family.

Abraham came to realize that a mysterious being wished these blessings for him. For the first time, the bible shouts exultantly, "Abraham put his faith in the Lord", and thereafter all is new. We are still on a journey of faith today with God.

The archbishop is calling us to resume this journey with God. Are we up to saying to God at this very time in our history, "You are my rock and my strength"? I ask this question because the word to believe in Hebrew is AMEN, meaning 'sure foundation, safety, security'.

Faith of St Paul

Before his conversion, St Paul epitomised an enemy of the faith of any age in history. Today's opponents cannot match Paul for zeal, conviction and homicidal intent. A few verses before the passage read today from his letter to the Philippians, he boasts: "A Hebrew born of Hebrew parents, in the matter of the Law, I was a Pharisee; as for religious fervour, I was a persecutor of the Church; as for the uprightness embodied in the Law, I was faultless." (Phil 3:5-6)

Unexpectedly, Paul is knocked out by faith. In a haunting confession, Paul says, "But what were once my assets I now through Christ Jesus count as losses. If only I can gain Christ and be given a place in him, with the uprightness I have gained not from the Law, but through faith in Christ, that I

may come to know him and the power of his resurrection, and partake of his sufferings by being moulded to the pattern of his death, striving towards the goal of resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:8-10)

Faith wins out every time. With faith, we can share in Christ’s sufferings, even in his death, because this is the path to know Christ and to know the power of his resurrection! With St Paul’s perspective, we can see ourselves in a very good position in this shifting landscape, in the aftermath of a veritable earthquake. The certainties that filled the former landscape are lost, but everything is gained from faith. From our sufferings, we will gain life, resurrection with Christ.

When Paul asks the community to follow his example, he is referring to this way of living by faith. However, we heard that some of them had become “the enemies of Christ”, probably because some of them reduce their faith in Christ to the observance of traditional practices – circumcision, abstaining from certain foods, fasting and penances. These were recurring ideas from which Paul sought to free the early Christians.

Faith of disciples

Sleepy disciples struggle to live faithfully. They dream of shining faces and gleaming tents, but dreaming of tents and glory is counter to the direction that Jesus takes. He must fulfill an “exodus” by passing through suffering and death to resurrection. They have too little faith for the journey. Is ours?

The concrete problems and the dramas that we have to confront cause us fear. Fear is the enemy of faith. The archbishop is inviting us to befriend faith.

Every Sunday, disciples who gather to celebrate the Eucharist go up the mountain; they hear the words and see the face of the transfigured Lord; they verify in faith that his “exodus” is not concluded with death.

Dear sisters and brothers, let us pray for one another that our faith may not fail at this confronting time.