

HOMILY
ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHER PROWSE
CATHOLIC ARCHBISHOP OF CANBERRA AND GOULBURN
AND APOSTOLIC DELEGATE OF WAGGA WAGGA DIOCESE
MONDAY 15 APRIL AND TUESDAY 16 APRIL 2019
CHRISM MASS 2019
ST CHRISTOPHER'S CATHEDRAL, FORREST

Readings:

Isaiah 61: 1-3, 6, 8-9

Apocalypse 1:5-8

Gospel Luke 4:16-21

There can be no doubt that the Catholic Church in Australia, this Holy Week, finds itself afresh on the hill of Calvary.

There is really no need to repeat the toxic societal context in which we find ourselves in Australia today – we know it and we feel it. Yet, on the other hand, there is no need denying it either.

Since we do find ourselves afresh on Calvary, let us consider therefore the company we are keeping. There were so few at the foot of the Calvary Cross on the first Good Friday. It was very much a “Marian” companionship. There was Mary the mother of Jesus. There was Mary Magdalen, St John, the apostle Jesus loved and some others. Let us not be like “the others” who fled or absented themselves “for fear of the Jews.”

As Missionary Disciples, we must approach this moment in our Catholic history here in Australia with faith not fear.

Let us all choose faith (not fear) in this Chrism Mass when we are all together being led by Jesus and Mary.

In this precious moment, let us listen to the “Calvary” words of the Lord Jesus: his last words on the Cross.

1. “Father forgive them.” (Luke 23/34)
2. “Today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23/43)
3. “Behold your son...behold your mother.” (John 19/26, 27)
4. “My God, My God why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15/34)
5. “I thirst.” (John 19/28)
6. “It is finished.” (John 19/30)
7. “Father into your hands I commit my spirit.” (Luke 23/46)

These final words of Jesus are all words of surrender, trust and forgiveness. Let us never forget that Jesus embraced Calvary by walking defencelessly to the Cross.

Nothing is reported, in direct speech, of Mary's words at the Calvary Cross. Presumably, she wailed tears of great grief witnessing her son's torture and death. Her posture would have been as always, “treasuring and pondering” (Luke 2/19) all that God was doing.

As mentioned, the Apostles with the exception of John, were absent or distant from this moment due to fear.

Where were they? What were they thinking?

In their fear perhaps they recalled some of the words that Jesus spoke to them in the three years of their discipleship.

“Will you go too?...Where will we go you have the words of everlasting life?” (John 6/66-69)

They may have recalled Peter walking on the water to Jesus. As soon as Peter took his eyes off Jesus he began to sink. (Matthew 14/28-31)

Poignantly, there is no mention in the Scriptures of the other Apostles in the boat encouraging Peter to keep walking on the water by keeping his eyes on the Lord. Once his eyes left the Lord he began to sink shamelessly.

However, we know after the Resurrection and Pentecost the fear of the Apostles was transformed into great faith. They were filled with the Holy Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2/42) indicate that the early Church quickly gathered around 4 pillars of stability – The teaching of the Apostles, the Fellowship, the Breaking of the Bread and the Prayers.

Let us now take a time leap to a more recent Australian example of faith rather than fear amongst the priests of our region.

As Anzac Day approaches I wish to take the example of a great Australian priest from Southern New South Wales. In the adversity of just over 100 years ago, he showed great Priestly Holiness while surrounded by the terror of war – the First World War.

I'm referring to Fr Thomas Mullins, former Parish Priest of Ardlethan and Barmedman. (Near Griffith & Leeton)

He was born in Limerick Ireland in 1876 and died in 1939 of an ongoing illness related to Malaria. He is buried in the Ardlethan cemetery. Fr Mullins arrived in Australia as a young priest in 1900. Travelling around his geographically huge parish as the Parish Priest of Barmedman and Ardlethan helped him develop into a great horseman. It was unsurprising, therefore, that he volunteered in May 1915 to be a chaplain for the 12th Light Horse Regiment. He served in Gallipoli. He was also a member of the 5th Light Horse Regiment, during the Palestine campaign, until Armistice.

As a “First World War” chaplain he showed outstanding leadership. He was mentioned four times in dispatches. In his Military Cross citation, he was famously given (January 1918), he was described as showing “great fearlessness and was right in the fighting line...he never left the trenches.” He was described as “a gallant soul and valiant.”

He left us all, even today, a fascinating ongoing legacy. He brought back to Australia, seeds from the ancient olive trees of Gethsemane in the Holy Land. He

planted those seeds at Ardlethan where there is now an enormous olive tree. We thank Monsignor Kevin Barry-Cotter who took cuttings from that tree and planted them outside the West Wyalong Church. Those cuttings have now become a very substantial olive tree as well. They are continuing reminders for us of the gallantry, bravery and fearlessness of this great Priest War Chaplain.

And now we arrive at our present moment, 100 years later, the Chrism Mass in 2019. As mentioned previously, we are at a "Calvary" moment in our own Church. It is not in the context of war but the context of the sex abuse scandal and all that it revealed.

Although we are here in 2019, sacramentally, we are back on the hill of Calvary. We know that the Mass is the re-presentation of the Last Supper that sacramentally makes present today the sacrifice of Calvary with Jesus our High Priest and Victim.

So in this moment of great fragility, let us hear Jesus's final words. Let us respond in faith (not fear) and stand alongside Mary the mother of God, Mary Magdalene, John and the others.

Let us recall – keeping our eyes on Jesus lest we sink, the words of the Apostles when they say "to whom else shall we go, you Lord have the words of everlasting life."

Let us be united in devotion to "the teaching of the Apostles, the Fellowship and the Breaking of the Bread and the prayers."

Let us pray in this Mass, with the great Priests, Religious, and Laity who have gone before us and showed fearlessness in their times of trouble (like Fr Thomas Mullins). Let us say with St Thomas at the time of Pentecost, "We believe help our unbelief." (Mark 9/23-25) Let us truly believe, paraphrasing tonight's Gospel, that "these Scriptural texts are being fulfilled today even as you listen."

Let us truly believe that the Lord continues to use us to "bind up hearts that are broken" as proclaimed in the First Reading and let us always exchange "despondency with praise."

May I leave you with some inspiring words from one of our patristic greats – the Cappadocian Father: St Gregory of Nazianzus (330-390). As mentioned in a recent excerpt from the Second Reading in our Office of Readings, he said in a sermon, "...we must sacrifice ourselves to God each day and in everything we do, accepting all that happens to us for the sake of the Word, imitating his passion by our sufferings, and honouring his blood by shedding our own. We must be ready to be crucified." I ask my brothers to please now stand and renew our Priestly Promises.

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