

19 July 2015

With less than two weeks to go, I am conscious of entering my final days here at St Brendan's and Holy Rosary. During my time on retreat in North Sydney at Mary Mackillop Place, I prayed often for the parishioners of Flemington and Kensington and I prayed also for myself seeking Mary Mackillop's intercession as I go forward now to face the new and unknown aspects of my ministry, a little apprehensive as we often are about the future and how exactly things might unfold. I thought a lot about Mary Mackillop, her unshakeable sense of faith, her trust in God's providence, her ability to remain resolute in her vocation. But during my times of prayer in Sydney, I also gave thanks to God for my time as parish priest of Flemington and Kensington and the joy of my ministry as a priest, conscious of my call to be a shepherd of God's people whether working in a parish or teaching in a theological college.

The call to be a shepherd is heard very clearly in today's first reading from Jeremiah. The sheep might lose their way in life but it is the shepherd who is condemned for neglecting the flock entrusted to his care. The language is very harsh. And, as so often happens in the bible, especially in the Old Testament, where there is darkness and despair, God makes a promise. God promises new life. God will gather together the scattered flock, he will bring them to new pastures, he will place them once again as a sign of unity; they will be fruitful and increase in number. And then God says, 'I will raise up shepherds to look after them and pasture them and not one of them shall be lost.' These shepherds are called to love their sheep, to care for them and to protect them. As a priest at this point of transition in my life, I feel these words very deeply, I hear them in a new and challenging way, I feel this call to set forth once again with new energy and commitment as I did on my ordination day almost 18 years ago.

We are God's people gathered in unity, gathered in faith, gathered to be nourished and strengthened by the faith we profess and live. We are people of the Spirit and God's Spirit makes us one. This sense of parish unity is very important to me now that I will be a parish priest no longer, the joy of gathering with God's people here at the table of life, here to break open the word of salvation. This is mightily important for St Paul as we hear in today's second reading; St Paul was often dealing with the early Christian communities where there was division, tension and petty jealousies. His constant message was that Jesus had made them one body, Jesus brings us into saving unity, the risen Lord breaks down the barriers of race and nationality to make us the one people of God. Peace, unity, reconciliation and a very powerful sense of mission as bearers of good news to the world; these are the themes that St Paul literally hammered out every day. In fact, I feel a little like St Paul; called to nourish and build up one community of faith and then to move elsewhere to continue the same work in a different way.

This is the call of discipleship. It comes to us in Baptism and Confirmation, it is strengthened by the Eucharist which we celebrate and the gift of the Spirit that unites us. Each of us receives this call, each of us receives from God the gifts that enable us to live out this vocation of good news in our daily lives. We get so used to coming to Mass here that we forget just how important is the witness of our gathering together in prayer, parishioners who make an effort, those who generously give of their time and talents in the ministries of service, all of you who generously support the parish and are also generous in supporting other special appeals that come our way. The people who came before us here were united in faith, disciples who dreamed of a big future and committed themselves with determination to the task at hand. And so while my small part of the story comes to an end here, the longer and richer and greater story of this parish community will continue into the future. And the risen Lord will continue to raise up good shepherds, he will continue to bring each of us into the mystery of his saving unity and set us before the world as a sign of the goodness and kindness of God. I have known personally this goodness and kindness of God in my ministry here over the last 4½ years; I know it will continue to guide me into the future.

And so, let us gather our prayer together and celebrate our unity in faith, called in Baptism, nourished by the Eucharist and made one by the Spirit of God who continues each day to renew and give life to our Church and our world.