

20 July 2014

I've just returned from my annual retreat at Mary MacKillop Place in Nth Sydney. The retreat centre is adjacent to the chapel where St Mary MacKillop is buried. I have spoken about this place before and the experience of sitting and praying by the tomb of Australia's first saint. This in itself is a wonderful and enriching experience; what is more inspiring is seeing the procession of people throughout the day who come to pray and seek the intercession of this remarkable and saintly woman. Many people often knelt at the tomb for short or lengthy periods of time; countless people wrote their prayers and intercessions and placed them in the large wooden box near the tomb. At times, it was clear that many people were sad or distressed, praying for a sick loved one or going through a particularly difficult moment in their lives. Being the second week of the school holidays, many parents and grandparents brought their children who seemed like they were playing near Mary MacKillop's tomb or coming to visit a friend. One Vietnamese boy thought he would try a somersault!!

It was quite touching to see the extraordinary number of people who simply gathered in order to pray, to be inspired and to seek the intercession of this extraordinary woman of faith. I have spoken before about the extraordinary legacy of Mary MacKillop; her great faith, her love for the poor, her absolute commitment to do God's will and to trust in God's providence even in the darkest and most challenging moments of her life. And in these challenging moments, Mary MacKillop never gave up. She trusted, she remained faithful and resolute to her calling, she allowed herself to be transformed by the grace of God working in her life.

Naturally I thought of Mary MacKillop and my retreat experience when I saw the line in today's Gospel; 'Then the virtuous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father'. For Jesus, the virtuous are those who plant the good seed of faith, those who listen to God's word, those who are faithful to God's word, those who produce a good harvest. Stories and parables from the scriptures at times seem so distant from our experience. Here in Australia, we have an example of a woman of great faith who was completely faithful to the words of Jesus in today's Gospel. The virtues of Mary MacKillop's life shine brilliantly like the sun.

And the Church in Australia is truly blessed to have as its first saint this young woman who was born into an ordinary family in Brunswick St, Fitzroy, in the early days of colonial Victoria.

A young woman born in Brunswick St, Fitzroy, reaped an extraordinary harvest for the Gospel and the Kingdom, gave herself unceasingly for the concern and education of the poor and inspired hundreds of other women to follow her in the Josephite order. So much comes from the small seed of faith. That's why Jesus uses these images and parables in the Gospel and the call of discipleship, even in the challenging times, is to let this seed of faith grow in our hearts, to let our lives be transformed by the power of God's grace.

But what happens in life when we feel tired and weary, when the burdens of life get us down, when we find it difficult to pray, when we question the very existence of God let alone if he is even interested in hearing and answering our prayers? Mary MacKillop knew all about this as St Paul hints at in today's second reading; 'The Spirit comes to help us in our weakness'. That is, even in moments of doubt and weakness, the Spirit of God is at work in our lives strengthening our hope and lifting us in faith. St Paul had many moments of doubt and struggle, conflict and uncertainty. But he gave his life completely for the Gospel, he committed himself to preaching the word and to building up the Christian community of faith. And in his life, Jesus reaped an abundant harvest. In Paul's life, the seed was scattered and produced the good fruit of faith.

Today as we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we reserve a special prayer for the victims of the Malaysian Airlines' tragedy and their families. We continue to pray for peace in the troubled parts of our world. We pray that the good seed of faith reaps an abundant harvest of justice, peace and reconciliation.