

WHAT ST BRENDAN'S MEANS TO ME

St Brendan's Day, 18 May 2014

St Brendan's is special. It represents both tradition and change. It is an historic parish, in Australian terms, and yet it always contains and reflects the contemporary changes occurring in the broader Australian community. Except for the Indigenous people who have been, for millennia, the traditional custodians of the land on which this church stands, we have always been a migrant community since the old church and school were built in Church Street in the 1880s under Father Nelan.

Four generations of my family have been parishioners of St Brendan's. My great-great uncle, Michael Herrick, a migrant from Ireland, was married at St Brendan's (the old church) in 1891, 123 years ago. At that time most parishioners would have come from the same background as Michael – Irish migrants who hoped to find a better life for their families in this land. Hence, the Saint's name chosen for our parish, St Brendan, patron of the long and difficult voyage to an uncertain destination, requiring extraordinary faith, hope and courage.

Over the years, members of my family, with so many others of this parish, have been baptised and received the sacraments here, been educated in the parish school, married here, received their final blessing here and been carried from this church to their resting place. Together with the Clergy, the Sisters and the parish, school and kindergarten staffs, the people of St Brendan's, past and present, have contributed to and participated in the life of the parish in multiple and generous ways to make the parish a living entity of faith, care and belonging. Even when people move away from the parish they usually carry it in their hearts. There are memories of St Brendan's, Flemington, in places near and far, all over the world, I'm sure.

In the 60 plus years I have lived here I have witnessed the changes occurring over time. When I began my education in 1955 in the infant parish school, many of the children of the first wave of post-war migrants were also beginning their school years in Australia. How fortunate my generation was to benefit from this experience. How it broadened and enlightened us in every way and formed us for the future, together, in the new Australia. St Brendan's was influenced now by the language, culture and faith of people from Italy, Malta, Holland, Eastern Europe, and a fresh wave of migrants, too, from NZ, Ireland and the UK.

In the 1950s and 60s, the 'New Australians' also taught us, here at St Brendan's, that religion didn't always need to be so solemn, but could be expressed in joyful and celebratory ways. I have enjoyed ever since a good 'after party' (complete with piano accordion once upon a time) to celebrate the receiving of a Sacrament. I remember the sight of a Saint's Day procession accompanied by a brass band wending its way through the streets of Flemington. And now, what is more affirming of our rich Catholic culture than to hear parts of the Mass and other liturgy expressed and sung in our community languages?

When the monumental changes of Vatican II began in the 1960s, we had already begun our journey to a new, more open mindset that allowed us to embrace these changes in our Church and parish community.

From the 1970s and 80s we witnessed a further development of the St Brendan's story with the arrival of people from Vietnam seeking refuge and hope here, after Australian involvement in the war there. We have welcomed people from the countries of South America, The Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, China and other parts of Asia, and many other places besides - all settling in their turn and often moving to other parts of Melbourne but having their first experience of Australian life here at our Church and school.

Now, in the 21st Century, we welcome to our parish settlers from the nations of Africa. We have had our own Egyptian Catholic Coptic community for many years now. They bring to St Brendan's a whole new experience of tradition, faith and culture. All groups over time have been welcomed by the St Brendan's community and contribute to and reshape it in their turn.

When does change itself become tradition? In time it does, and with good will. I realise now that openness to change, prompted by open-heartedness, has itself become a proud tradition of our parish. Yes, the parish is special, even extraordinary. It draws on the resilience and strength of its amazing history as it continues to shape its future.

St Brendan, the Voyager, in undertaking his great sea journey across the Atlantic in the Sixth Century, probably from the western tip of Europe to Newfoundland and back again, had complete faith that God would care for him and his crew. In my life here I have seen that there is room for everyone in St Brendan's boat and, I believe, that boat is sailing well, under God's care, into a good future.

In the Irish language of St Brendan himself:

Lá féile breá Naomh Bhreandán daoibh go léir.
Happy St Brendan's Day to you all.

Catherine Herrick