



Australian Province of the Society of Jesus

Homily Our Lady of the Way Parish, North Sydney 140th Year Celebration, April 15th, 2018

I thank you for the opportunity to be with you and celebrate the 140th anniversary of arrival of the Jesuits in this parish in 1878.

My previous visits to this parish were for two funerals – Paul Coleman’s and Tony (AV) Smith’s – and my visits to other Jesuit parishes in recent years has been to announce our Jesuit departure. It is consoling to me, and I hope to you all, that neither of these agenda is being celebrated this weekend.

On April 25th 1878 Fr Joseph Dalton arrived in Sydney, having being farewelled in Melbourne by the people of the Richmond parish. In his farewell he said: ‘You remind me of the many beautiful, substantial and expensive church works undertaken and in some cases completed during these years, and in the goodness of your hearts you would fain give me the credit of them, forgetting that without your generous, substantial, and persistent co-operation they could never have been accomplished’.

Our celebration tonight is a reminder of 140 years of life in this parish and with a sense of the great energy, sacrifice and commitment of those who brought life to this north shore of Sydney. Once known as ‘an isolated settlement in the bush’ and Lane Cove described as ‘the resort of disreputable people’, much has grown and taken life in this parish since 1878. We have much to be grateful for and give thanks.

What was true in those early and challenging days, as is also true today, is our need to be people of hope, companions of the Lord and lifted up by his Resurrection. We live in a world of competition, individualism, materialism and violence. Displacement of peoples, threats of war and terrorism. We are members of a Church that is human and sinful. We are weak. We need, as we desire, to know and experience the love and power of Christ’s Resurrection.

The gospel reading for today begins with those two disciples who had been on the road to Emmaus after Jesus had died. They knew what it was like to have hopes dashed. We see them, heads down, spirits broken as they walk that long, lonely road out of Jerusalem. So totally caught in their own sadness and grief they are totally unaware of the risen Jesus who walks beside and talks with them. It is only when they sit and he breaks bread with them do their eyes become open to his presence.

I am aware, as I speak now, that we are in the last stages of the Commonwealth Games and a final ceremony that will begin soon.

We have, over recent weeks, been quite aware of the many nations who continue to make up the Commonwealth. That able and para athletes might compete together, and with an even balance of male and female medals, have been encouraging signs. Less encouraging are those times when all we seemd to see or hear about were the gold medals that Australians won.

I confess I have enjoyed witnessing some remarkable sporting efforts, but I have also been struck by those who not only did not win a medal but faced failure and defeat, often sudden and quite unexpected. We saw examples of disqualification, physical injury and pain with each person's story holding a particular moment in their life when much that had been promised and hoped for no longer was possible. And with this experience came sadness and humiliation, a deep sense of loss.

I think of Taneka Kovchenko, 23. Training to dive off the 10 metre board since the age of 14; on the evening of the games, after a body scan, told that she ran the risk of becoming a ventilated paraplegic. The end of her diving ambitions.

Claire Tallent, 36. A representative in previous World, Olympic and Commonwealth Games and mother. Leading in the 20 km walk race; disqualified two kilometres to go.

Like sporting athletes we can become so caught in what we want to achieve that we can find ourselves quite lost when all we hoped for no longer becomes possible. We can be like those disciples on the road to Emmaus and miss those signs of God's life and hope that is rich and all around us. The resurrection stories are powerful because they offer life and hope, especially to those who thought all was gone and finished. This grace of the Lord's resurrection can be found in the simple and extraordinary moments of our human lives.

Pope Francis in his recent apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate, Rejoice and Be Glad*, encourages us in our journey of holiness. He mentions simple things where he sees holiness 'present in the patience of God's people' ... mothers, grandmothers ... parents who raise their children with immense love, in those who work hard to support their families, in the sick, in elderly religious who never lose their smile ... in our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence. (#7)

Living in that holiness of the Risen Lord is a simple, human invitation. There can be extraordinary moments as well. This past week we remembered the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King. He, and many others, sacrificed their lives that African Americans could live in freedom. One group who helped bring brought about that change were young people, black and white, who together faced enormous violence and opposition. Their energy, hope and sacrifices – even sometimes leading to death – remind us that the Resurrection is also about God's dream of the impossible becoming possible.

Our celebration here tonight gives thanks for the many who have shaped and encouraged life in this parish over 140 years, many ordinary moments of hope, holiness and love, some extraordinary ones as well.

When we come to this table of the eucharist, as many have done for the past 140 years, and break bread in the Lord's name, we become open and graced to a new, and yet unknown, future together. A future where hope challenges defeat; encouragement overcomes fear; and where the energy and spirit of the young lead us to dream, with the Risen Lord, of a new and shared humanity.

Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus the Risen Lord walks beside us. We cannot do it alone. We do it together. And we do it with Him.

Brian F McCoy SJ