

AMSSA CONFERENCE MASS
FEAST OF ST MARY MCKILLOP

Readings: 1 Kings 17:8-16; Mat 6:25-34

Speaking the Silence: the call to be prophetic in liminal time

Dear friends,

It is a great honour for me to be here and to celebrate the opening Eucharist with you in the context of this 15th Biennial Conference of the Australasian Mercy Secondary Schools Association. I have a deep admiration for you because of the way you nurture hope and carry that hope to others. In the darkness of despair and alienation that many experience especially in the Church at this time, you are like the Hebrew midwives Shipra and Puah. Their action and agency gave rise to that movement to freedom called the Exodus. They were up to the task of reframing a harsh reality into a hope-filled vision. They did so by refusing to accept the impossibility of changing the status quo and by showing faithfulness to God in delivering new life.

This was what Mary McKillop did when she rallied her sisters behind the poor and vulnerable in colonial Australia. She took a prophetic stance not simply in providing affordable Catholic education and health care to the poor masses but by fundamentally reimagining the Gospel and recasting the Christian story in the light of the great cultural challenges of their times. “Never see a need without doing something about it”. In acting out of a strong passion for the Kingdom and a visceral compassion for the suffering, she brought about a fresh hope for others.

Mary McKillop, Catherine McCauley and countless other prophetic women like them often challenged the status quo in the Church. They weren't a cheap labour force. They were pioneers and trailblazers who responded to the great cultural challenges of their time in creative ways. They championed fresh ways of being Church; they broke new ground. When the river had changed its course, they refused to sit on the edges of the billabong or like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, they didn't fix their minds on returning to Kansas. Instead, they explored where the river flowed and charted a way for others to follow.

The boundary breaking spirit of Jesus spurs them on to go against the prevalent culture. When the prevalent culture often legitimated by dominant religious system, treated poor women and children with disdain, prophetic women

embraced them; when it rejected certain groups of people like Jews, blacks, LGBTIs, prophetic women revered their dignity. Like them and the prophets of old, we too must reframe the harsh reality around us into a hopeful future to unfold. We do so not by repeating the practices and customs of yesterday but by reimagining the charismatic spirit that drove our founder in the first place. The words of Ezekiel in the vision of the valley of dead bones come to mind. “I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive”. That is our prophetic mission. We re-incarnate the Gospel that it may come alive again for our people in our time.

The Word of God today calls us to act not out of fear but with vulnerable trust in the face of a brave new world. A hope-filled disciple is moved by abiding faith, courage and even reckless abandon.

In the first reading, we hear an inspiring story of generosity and vulnerable trust from the Book of Kings. Elijah was on his way to confront 400 false prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. It was the most challenging mission and Elijah soon learned that the way to fulfill that mission was not to rely on his devices but on the power of faith. He had been fed by the ravens in the wilderness. But here in a foreign land and during a death-dealing famine, he met a destitute but incredibly generous widow. She gave him the last meal that she and her son depended on for their own survival.

The point of the story is that people who act with vulnerable trust and courage can bring about the transformation beyond their limited capacity. God shows his power through small but prophetic acts of courage, risk-taking and reckless abandon. In modern times, such acts as those of Martin Luther King Jr, Rosa Parks, Mary McKillop, Oscar Romero catalysed humanity to greater justice, inclusion and emancipation.

Often times, when we find ourselves facing supposed impossibilities, it is because we do not think that we have the critical mass needed to overcome the situation. Significant social changes, we reason, rely on the participation and conversion of large numbers of people. But there is an alternative image to critical mass that is aptly and biblically named critical yeast. Instead of asking a question about quantity, how many people, the question becomes who, which people, in this situation, “would have a capacity, if they were mixed and held together, to make

things grow, exponentially, beyond their numbers?” Put another way, what mix of people might make the good stuff of life grow and spread?

In the Gospel, Jesus tells us not to worry about what we are to eat, drink and dress. Jesus teaches us that God is the God who cares for the whole of life, even its minuscule detail. However, it is being aligned with the mind of God and having God’s expansive vision that we can bring all of life to its proper end. In essence, Jesus challenges us to find another way to the patterns of the empire. It is no accident that he evokes the cultural memory of Solomon who epitomized the imperial paradigm of excess, power and control. He calls us to be catalysts for an alternative society: “Set your hearts on God’s kingdom and on his saving justice”.

As we gather to listen deeply to the voice of the Spirit through the cry of the poor, the cry of mercy and the cry of the wounded earth, we renew our commitment to be catalysts and agents of God’s reign of justice. We are inspired by women like Mary McKillop and Catherine McAuley, who taught us what it means to leave nothing undared for the kingdom. In the midst of the chaos of wilderness and the voice of the fearful, we are called to walk humbly, to act boldly and prophetically. The Mercy legacy is entrusted to us that we may make it grow and spread, not through the old paradigm of power and conquest but through prophetic witness and critical agency.

Dear friends of Mercy,

It comforts us to know that the Church was not at its best when it reached the heights of its power in what was known as Christendom. The Church was at its best when it was poor, persecuted, marginalized and powerless. All of the metaphors and all of the dispositions of Jesus point to a humble Church: a little salt, a little yeast and a little light. Christendom and for the most part of history, we have tried to be great, powerful and dominant. This liminal time may turn out to be the best time to be part of a humble, inclusive, merciful and servant Church.

Let us pray that by our generous, trust-filled and courageous agency, God may bring about the transformation beyond our limited capacity. May the example of Mary McKillop and Catherine McAuley guide us as we endeavour to be agents of the Reign of God and its justice. May the Holy Spirit accompany us as we move boldly towards the future towards which we set our hearts.