



Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

South Perth Parish Centenary Celebrations

HOMILY

**By the Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

St Columba Catholic Church, South Perth
Sunday 29 October, 2017

I rejoiced when I heard them say, "Let us go to God's house" – and now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

These words from Psalm 122 capture something of the joy which I suspect many of us feel as we gather in this historic church to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the formal erection of the parish of Saint Columba and the appointment of Fr Raphael Pace as the first parish priest of the Catholic community which gathered on this site to celebrate Mass. The community already existed at that time of course. Indeed, since 1908, the Sisters of Mercy had been running a Catholic school here which came under the direction of the Sisters of Saint Joseph in 1915. The Church in which we are celebrating this morning was blessed and opened in 1937, twenty years after the establishment of the parish, and of course, since then, the story of Saint Columba's has been one of continued development and growth. I am sure that the first groups of sisters here, and in a particular way Fr Pace, could not have envisaged what the next hundred years would bring, just as we today cannot imagine exactly what St Columba's Parish will look like, and feel like, a hundred years from now.

What we can do today, of course, is to look back with gratitude and a sense of awe at what has been achieved, look around with pride at the richness of the community which gathers in this church today, and look forward with confidence to all that the future will bring.

In doing these three things – looking back, looking around and looking forward – I think we quickly realise that what we are celebrating is not so much the material achievements of the past one hundred years and more, but the fidelity to the Gospel which has marked, continues to mark, and will continue to mark the presence of the Catholic community here in this part of Perth.

Fidelity to the Gospel is of course the only criterion by which we can truly measure ourselves as individual Christians and as a Catholic community. At the end of Mass today we will launch the official parish history. I have not yet had a chance to read it but I am confident that it will tell a story of fidelity – even though, if it is an honest history, it will also tell of moments of less than perfect fidelity, both on the part of individuals and by the community as a whole. It is important that we acknowledge both, in our own individual stories and in the communal story of our Church. From its very beginnings the Church has been marked by extraordinary fidelity – the patron of your own parish, Saint Columba, is but one of countless thousands of examples of this – but the



Church has also been disfigured by the infidelity of so many who through malice, weakness, fear or obstinacy, failed to live up to the high ideals to which the Lord continually and consistently calls us all.

Jesus himself was the victim of this malice, obstinacy and fear, both on the part of many of the religious leaders of his time who were intimidated and exposed by his goodness, and on the part of his closest disciples most of whom failed so comprehensively in following him, even to the point of denying him, betraying him and deserting him at the time of his passion and death.

This paradox of denial and rejection in the face of goodness is very evident in today's gospel reading. At first glance it might seem praiseworthy that the Pharisees ask Jesus such an important question: *Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?* Surely this is a question worth asking, one which is all about fidelity to God. And yet, as the Gospel writer makes clear, the Pharisees ask this question in an attempt to trap Jesus. In the Jewish world in which Jesus was living there was much argument about the levels of importance of the various laws the Jewish people were expected to obey. Whatever answer Jesus gave he would inevitably have offended and scandalised some people, while making others happy. In a sense then today's gospel invites us to look behind the question to the hardness of heart which prompted it – and to ask ourselves whether we too, like some of the Jewish leaders, are uncomfortable with Jesus and would like, at the very least, to keep him at a safe distance so that he does not upset our comfortable way of thinking.

Because, inevitably, the more we open ourselves to him, Jesus will upset our comfortable ways of thinking and acting. This is perhaps no more obvious than in the answer he gives to the question asked of him in today's Gospel. Rather than give just one answer Jesus gives two: you must love God with all your heart, soul and mind. And you must love your neighbour as yourself. Both answers reflect traditional Jewish teaching. But what is new is that Jesus puts them together, making love of our neighbour a necessary and inevitable outcome of a genuine love of God. In doing this Jesus ties together in an unbreakable bond the formal practice of religion and practical outreach to others, especially those in need, as the parable of the Good Samaritan in particular reminds us.

Every Christian community is called together by God to be a living embodiment of this double-sided commandment. It is not enough that it be a community which gathers for ritual worship, or alternatively that it be a community which bands together to do good things, such as running a high-quality school, or sponsoring groups like the St Vincent de Paul Society, or fund-raising for worthy causes: a Christian community needs to be both. It needs to be a community which, as St Mary McKillop insisted, never sees a need without doing something about it, and a community which knows that it will never in fact be able to live up to this high ideal if it does not genuinely and consistently look beyond itself to the Lord Jesus, who calls the community together, feeds it with his Word and with his Body and Blood, and enlivens it with the gift of his Holy Spirit.

Today we pray in remembrance and gratitude for all those who for the last one hundred years and more strived to be faithful to this ideal here in this parish. We acknowledge with admiration and with gratitude all those who work together in our own time to give expression to this ideal of faithful discipleship. And we entrust to the Lord with hope and confidence all those who will come in the future to Saint Columba's to be a part of the ongoing story of fidelity, giving expression to



the hope expressed by the Lord Jesus himself at the Last Supper: *By this will everyone know that you are my disciples; that you love one another as I have loved you.*

Launch of Parish History

As I mentioned in my homily this morning I have not yet had a chance to read the parish history, although I am looking forward to doing so. Just as I said in the homily that it would have been impossible for Fr Pace, the first sisters, and the early community which gathered here one hundred years ago to imagine what the future of the parish would be, so now I also want to say that it is perhaps almost as difficult for us to understand all the challenges that the first community must have faced in the early years of the twentieth century.

When the Sisters of Saint Joseph assumed responsibility for the school from the Sisters of Mercy in 1915, the First World War was already tearing Europe apart. When the parish was officially established, and Fr Pace became the first parish priest, in 1917, that War was still raging, with devastating consequences for the whole world, of course, but also and particularly for the young Australian nation. Who knows what fears, and sorrows, people carried with them as they gathered each Sunday morning for Mass in those days? Many tears must have been shed in the first buildings used for Mass, and from 1937 in this present church right up until today, as families and friends gathered for the funerals of their loved ones.

As well as tears of course, there would have been, and still are, moments of great joy and hope as babies are brought to the Church to receive the gift of new life in baptism, as children receive the Lord into their lives for the first time in the Eucharist, as people's lives are renewed and strengthened through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, enriched by the power of the Holy Spirit at Confirmation, and united together in marriage. The history of any parish, and any parish church, is a history of God working powerfully in people's lives, often in ways we can see but more often in ways that we cannot. Jesus once told his disciples that he had come so that people might have life and have it to the full. As you read the story of this parish, of your parish, I hope that you will be able to read it in this light: as a testament to the never-failing, powerful, compassionate and liberating presence of God who called this parish into existence, continues to enliven it with the gift of his Spirit, and will never abandon it.

And so, with great pleasure, I now formally launch this parish history.