

20 October 2013

Today's gospel begins with the following phrase, 'Jesus told his disciples a parable about the need to pray continually and never lose heart'; to pray continually and never lose heart. It's obvious that the parable was told in response to a need. Some of the disciples were obviously struggling to pray and perhaps losing heart along the journey. This reading is about encouragement and hope, about not being defeated by life's circumstances and the challenges of daily life. There are times we have known people or perhaps known moments in our lives when we feel a little overwhelmed. I see it often in my ministry as a priest. People struggling with family conflict, marriage break-up, addictions of various kinds, mental illness, stress at work, issues of self-esteem.

As I say so often, when we look in the bible we see a reflection of our own daily experience. In today's first reading, we have this strange image of Moses defending Israel on the top of the hill with a staff in his hand. As long as Moses kept his arms raised, Israel was safe. But Moses began to grow tired and weary. So what did they do? They took two large stones and placed them under the arms of Moses to keep them raised. What an extraordinary image! Here is this man, this great leader chosen by God, needing two large stones to keep his arms raised up. And the lesson from the first reading? Even Moses, the chosen one of God, grew tired and weary in his journey of faith, in his desire to remain faithful to God's call in his life. God strengthened Moses when he was tired and weary.

In today's second reading, St Paul reminds us to stay close to the word of God. Paul calls us to learn the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Jesus. But maybe these biblical characters are a little beyond our reach. Maybe they lived a little too long ago for us to identify with in terms of our own journey of faith. But then I think a little closer to home. My mind is drawn to a young woman born in Brunswick St, Fitzroy, who founded the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart. I am talking, of course, about Mary MacKillop, Australia's first saint. A woman of remarkable faith and vision who like Moses endured her fair share of challenges, personal hardships and harsh criticism. But with a spirit of great faith and dedication, Mary MacKillop continued to travel around Australia establishing schools for the poor and dedicating herself to

Catholic education. Like Moses, there were times in her life when Mary MacKillop was tired and a little frustrated. But she always trusted in God's providence and love. She listened carefully to God's word and trusted in God's call even when it tested her vocation. She is a remarkable model of faith, of not giving up even in the face of life's daunting challenges.

St Mary MacKillop is inspiring because she is one of our own, raised up from the soil of faith here in Melbourne in the early colonial days of our history. Her ministry to the poor took Mary MacKillop and her sisters to the vast frontier outback of Australia. Her letters speak of vast distances travelled in driving rain or scorching summer heat, of her sisters receiving very little and struggling to put food on the table, of living in what can only be described as a tin shed and a make-shift bed. But Mary MacKillop speaks of serving God with joy and not being overwhelmed with life's challenges.

As we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we know times in life when our faith is strong and sometimes weak. But the word of God strengthens us, the sacrament of the Eucharist nourishes us, our belonging to a community of faith encourages us when life is not perfect, when things go wrong and failures challenge us. But we trust in the God who hears the cry of his people, who never turns away from us and never leaves us in despair. This is the God who always calls us out of darkness and into his own wonderful light.