

The Sign of the Cross

Dear fellow Pilgrims,

We began our Gathering last night with a Baptismal ritual, receiving the cross on our forehead, our ears, our eyes, our lips, our heart, our shoulders and on our whole life. The leader then said these words, “Take this cross as a reminder that the cross is your sign.”

And from the Gospel of Luke we heard, “Speaking to all, Jesus said, ‘If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me.’ (Luke 9:23)

What does this Sign of the Cross mean for us in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle at this point in our history? How will this Sign assist our understanding of our call to renewal and our capacity to Move Forward Together.

We have just witnessed a light and sound presentation of Our Story with its light and with its shade. We as a community experience both goodness and despair and the range of emotions in between. But here we are together to imagine the possibilities that we are called upon to dream within our own reality while remaining connected to the Universal Church, and there is tension in that for some of those gathered here.

The mission and resurrection of Jesus are both a message of hope to humanity and a call to conversion: to renounce the sources of violence and to look for new constructive ways of addressing the pain and anger we see in our world and our church. Jesus’ response to violence was not more violence but an act of transcendence that set humanity on a new path forever. A spirituality of nonviolence roots the nonviolent journey in the profound mystery of encountering and engaging with the woundedness and sacredness of all beings. It is a path to transformation, a transformation that rises up from our living the paschal mystery – the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus and of each one of us.

Richard Rohr points out that Christianity is the ‘Way of the Wound’. We have a crucified Christ who hangs on a cross in our churches. Mary stands at the foot of this Cross holding the wounds of her son and of humanity. We worship an un-natural image of God – the scourged Christ who liberates and saves humanity, who hangs as a contradiction. We sign ourselves with the Sign of the Cross at the beginning of and throughout

our Christian rituals. This was the first prayer my parent taught me as they said my night prayers and this was the first prayer I taught my children as I held their little hands and signed them into our faith. They now are doing the same with their children. The cross, a sign of contradiction and suffering is always with us. We know that this suffering is not meant to destroy us but to lead us to redemption.

Ronald Rolheiser writes in *The Holy Longing*: “The paschal mystery is a process of transformation within which we are given both new life and new spirit. It begins with suffering and death, moves on to the reception of new life, spends some time grieving the old and adjusting to the new, and finally, only after the old life has been truly let go of, is new spirit given for the life we are already living.”

The paschal cycle might be diagrammed as follows:

1. Good Friday... “the loss of life – real death”
2. Easter Sunday... “the reception of new life”
3. The Forty Days... “a time for readjustment to the new and for grieving the old”
4. Ascension... “letting go of the old and letting it bless you, the refusal to cling”
5. Pentecost... “the reception of new spirit for the new life that one is already living” (page 147)

Some of you would be aware that my dad died a month ago. His death is real and I am now in the phase of new life, a new life without him. I am a changed person because of this event and I now journey towards the Ascension, a passage of time that has no defined endpoint. I don't know how long it will take for me to let the grieving for the old life go and for me to welcome the new spirit of Pentecost.

Putting it into our language this paschal challenge for each of us might be described as:

1. “Name your deaths”
2. “Claim your births”
3. “Grieve what you have lost and adjust to the new reality”

4. "Do not cling to the old, let it ascend and give you its blessing"
5. "Accept the spirit of the life that you are in fact living" (page 148)

This renewal cycle can become a daily exercise of acknowledging our many deaths and risings which in turn can lead us to happiness, peace and maturity enabling us to see life as mystery. This is what I imagine happened to the disciples after the death of Jesus and then beyond his resurrection as they, like us, tried to live their new reality.

Recently Geoff Corbett wrote a column called 'Days of Despair'. In this column he reflected on his encounter with cancer and he named anxiety as an unpleasant companion, saying at times it could build to waves of doom. He also stated that Hugh Mackay said that we learn to grow through sadness, failure and doubt, not through happiness.

Our visual reflection this morning was an attempt for us to name our wounds but to also rejoice in our blessings. If we hold our imperfections and allow them to be healed and transformed we will be renewed as God is there in our woundedness as he was on the road to Emmaus. God came to us as a person to show us how to be fully human, to journey and to be transformed. It is in this framework of suffering, death and resurrection that God's becomes known to us and we are called into union with God and with each other. I think one of our challenges is how do we do this together, in communion with each other.

If we do not transform our pain we will transmit it by blaming the other – our bishop, our clergy, head-office, our schools, the parishioners, and the people who no longer come to church and this is violence. This dualistic thinking is destroying us. Do we dare to hold our woundedness with dignity but without blame, without answers, without closure, but just hold it?

I believe we are being invited to be compassionate, to embrace our pain and imperfection without judgment, explanation or analysis. We begin our Mass with a communal confession, Lord Have Mercy, Christ Have Mercy. We are being invited to the experience of the Trinity, as a place of *communio*. Are we able to embrace the healing of woundedness and acceptance in community? It is not about success but it is about being faithful. We might even be able to move through Ascension and onto Pentecost in the mystery of the paschal cycle. Many of the images of our life here in this Diocese are great ones. We are a light shining in this great wilderness. Are we able to see that light and draw others to it? That is one of the challenges for us today; to be energised by our re-imagining.

The words in the hymn to Mary MacKillop during our presentation say; 'Through the Cross you show hope to everyone shining in the heart of the Great Southland, and then it says, Pray for us.

We are journeying on the road less travelled and "the ties that bind us are sometimes impossible to explain. They connect us even after it seems the ties should be broken. Some bonds defy distance and time and logic."
(Meredith Grey)

I received many cards and emails, since the recent death of my dad, expressing many beautiful words of support which I have greatly appreciated. One such card had the following words by Joan Chittister on it:

This is the period when the parts of us
that died with the death of those we loved
rise again in the recollection of past moments
and the tears of past tendernesses.

This is when we know for certain
that every deed we ever do
lives on somewhere
in someone who remembers or lives it.

Death – the awareness of its coming,
the sounds of it around us -
is what calls us to a life beyond apathy,
beyond indifference, beyond unconcern.
Death reminds us to live.

I believe we are here because we are in love with our church and our faith and we are dreamers of a new way. We are already being renewed because we are here. Let's hold the tension we feel in a spirit of Communion and Mission as we Steward our way forward together.

Teresa Brierley
Vice Chancellor Pastoral Ministries
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