



**Saint Columba's 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Homily**

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

Saint Columba's, South Perth Parish  
Thursday 9 June 2016

As I was preparing some thoughts for the homily this evening I was fascinated to read in the Mass booklet of the relationship between St Columba and Finnian, the Abbot of the monastery in Clonard. As you will see if you read the account yourself Saint Columba and the Finnian were in dispute over a copy of an illustrated book of the Psalms. Saint Columba had made the copy himself from a manuscript that the abbot had brought back to Clonard from Rome.

As far as the Abbot was concerned Saint Columba had no right to make such a copy without the Abbot's permission. In the end Saint Columba was forced to surrender his copy to the Abbot and, quite possibly in disgust, or disgrace, or both, Saint Columba left the Monastery.

I mention this at the start of these few reflections for two reasons. The first is a personal one. When I was appointed as an auxiliary bishop in Melbourne eleven years ago the Holy Father followed the usual custom of giving me what is known as a titular See or diocese. Melbourne of course already had its archbishop so any assistant bishops had to be given a diocese that once existed but no longer does, for a bishop, even an assistant bishop, can't be a bishop unless he has a diocese. I was named as the titular bishop of Clonard and, as the early bishops of that diocese were the abbots of monasteries, I became the successor of Abbot Finnian.

Perhaps then, in a sense then, I as the successor of Abbot Finnian, and your parish priest, Monsignor O'Loughlin, as successor of St Columba, can heal the long-standing historical breach between these two men!

My second reason for mentioning what is in fact ancient history is that it reminds us that the Church, from its very beginnings, has had to deal with the great tension between the ideals to which we are called and the reality of our own often very poor attempts to reach those ideals. The squabble between Saint Columba and Abbot Finnian are hardly an inspiring example of Christian tolerance and forgiveness. St Paul, in tonight's first reading, speaks of the suffering he had to undergo in order to make up all that was still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body the Church. We sometimes think of that suffering as something inflicted on the Church from outside: from persecution, from bigotry, from prejudice and so on.

Many people would suggest that the Church is suffering more persecution in our own time than in any other time in history. I read recently that there were more Christians martyred for their faith in the twentieth century, than in the previous nineteen centuries put together. While this may well be true it is also the case that the Church suffers from within. The Church is, and always has



been, made up of very fragile, vulnerable and limited people. We need only think of the twelve men Jesus chose to be his first disciples. Of those twelve one betrayed him with a kiss, another denied him and all but one deserted him when he needed them most. The Gospels tell the story of these closest disciples of Jesus who constantly let him down, misunderstood him or disappointed him. And yet, at the same time, the gospels also tell the story of Jesus who, no matter how often the disciples failed him, never failed them. Their infidelity never led Jesus to give up on them. On the contrary their weakness seemed to make him love them all the more.

We might also say that Jesus never stopped believing in them. In tonight's gospel Jesus, on the eve of his own suffering and death, faced with the history of his disciples' failure and weakness, nevertheless continued to hold out the highest ideals to them. "Love one another," he says to them, "as I have loved you." It couldn't have been because he was blind to their struggles or their fragility that he kept putting these high ideals to them.

It could only have been because he knew that, if they constantly tried to remain open to his love and his grace in spite of their failings, then the ideals he was holding out to them would be able to lead them forward towards the fullness of life he was calling them to. Jesus knew that what his disciples could not hope to achieve on their own, they could begin to achieve if they remained united to him and open to an ever-deepening relationship of love with him.

Tonight as we celebrate the 80th anniversary of the commencement of the church, and as we rejoice in the renovations which have been completed the Lord is inviting us to remember that what was true of the Church from the beginning remains true today, and that what was true for the twelve disciples gathered in the Upper Room for the last Supper remains true for the disciples gathered in this Church this evening to celebrate the very same supper.

As a church, as a community of disciples, we know, perhaps in these days more than ever only too well, that we are a fragile, weak and sinful people. But we also know, and celebrate tonight with great joy and hope, that we are a people who, as long as we remain united to the Lord, can achieve great things and aspire to the highest ideals, because we do not travel the journey of life or of faith alone – we travel it together as a community and we travel in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd. As long as he is leading us, and we are doing our best to faithfully follow, and as long as we allow him to lift us up on his shoulders when we get lost, we can move forward with confidence.

Saint Columba and Abbot Finnian may have had their squabbles and their differences. Saint Columba may have been, as our Mass booklet tonight suggests, a man who had to struggle with a fiery temperament and quick temper. But in both cases, these men understood that the great struggle of their lives was to gradually allow the Lord to mould and shape them into the people he had created them to be, was calling them to be and needed them to be.

For eighty years the community which has gathered around this church has been trying to do the same. My prayer for you all is that you continue to be open to this re-shaping, re-creating Spirit of Jesus as you enter into the next stage of the journey of this parish.