

**Bishop Charles' homily: Mass in New Plymouth at which the new unified parish was established.**

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Yr B

*...We have all stumbled and fallen, rarely are our paths straight but always Jesus is with us...*

Some words remain through time in regular use in a language. Others fade. A word that Pope Francis is using a lot, we hardly ever hear out there. It begins with m – mercy. Language matters because it shapes how we think and reflect, therefore how we behave and imagine.

A key word and theme in our readings today is courage. It is a word that *has* endured: it is regularly used in our society, we hear it often.

In today's first reading we heard the prophet Isaiah, who lived about 700 years before Jesus, urging his people to have courage, to not be afraid. They were in exile, forced out of their homeland, wondering where on earth they would end up geographically and religiously – because being in exile meant they were cut off from their temple, their primary place of communion with God. Isaiah calms them, soothes them with his words, and so restores hope: God is coming to save you he says, – not just to hand out ration packs or survival kits – but to enable you to embrace life fully: the blind shall see, the lame shall leap, and the earth itself, our homeland, even the desert will flourish with abundant growth giving water. Courage enables a journey from exile to the promised land, from despair to hope, from sterility to fruitfulness.

What of us gathered here some 2700 years later. I don't want to suggest that being in Taranaki is like being in exile but nor is it the promised land. We too need courage; we ask for it and we do see it in action, often in unexpected ways. I'm sure examples of great courage come readily to each of us.

Last weekend I witnessed a beautiful example. I was in Waipawa and Waipukura and on the Sunday morning Mass we had confirmation. The two servers, Lauchie and Riley, were Yr 8 boys from the St Joseph's primary school. Nothing unusual about that except that Riley has cerebral palsy which means his muscles are only loosely controlled and so balance is a big challenge. After communion during the reflection time I was thinking about the courage this boy must have to embrace all sorts of activities, from simply walking down the street knowing that people will stare, to doing up his laces and putting on his server's gown. And then something further occurred; an insight from where I was placed in the recessional procession. Lauchie had taken the processional cross and after helping Riley down the sanctuary steps handed it to him to carry. So, as we processed out I saw Riley ahead literally wobble and shakily weave Jesus through the assembled believers in Christ, the Church, out into the town the world.

Doesn't that reflect something of our own faith journeys? We have all stumbled and fallen, rarely are our paths straight but always, Jesus is with us, leading us on from wherever or however we are. To really accept that truth requires the courage of belief; to be able in our hearts to echo the words of today's psalm: it is the Lord who keeps faith forever.

Faith, courage, hope are not prizes or rewards or the result of our good efforts; they are gifts from God to us that work if we accept and live them. Isaiah didn't say to his people courage be not afraid because I the great prophet have got the answers for you, I've planned it all out and now I am ready to lead you. He was as lost as his own people. He simply exhorted his people to trust, to step back and see themselves and their challenges in a bigger picture where God is present offering new and abundant life in the very midst of their falls and failures, and diversions and blindness; for it is God who keeps faith forever.

Today we are courageously embracing the challenges that face us as the faith community of New Plymouth. Of course, we are not the first to do this. Imagine the courage of those first missionaries, most about five years older than you Year 13s here, in their early twenties, who left France to embrace our shores, knowing that they would never return.

Today, the task of bearing witness to our Christian life while different certainly includes new challenges. We all know that. Yet, as Colin said and I know this is true, "Taranaki faith has always been strong" because the people – you – are attuned to the Holy Spirit at work in your midst. Taranaki has been and will be a fertile ground of families who have nurtured our faith and relished it; many vocations to the priesthood – diocesan, Jesuits, Columbans – and Religious Life as De la Salle Brothers and Mission Sisters have been and please God will be born from this land. This land too has known injustice and trials from Parihaka to the recent St Philomena's fire, but as Colin said "our faith stories reside not in bricks and mortar but in our people"; you.

New Plymouth needs you, needs your courageous and resolute witness. To the young people gathered in particular I want to say to you: step out onto the playing field of faith. Faith is not a spectator sport. We all have a role to play, young and elderly alike. Faith is not an imposition it's a gift and a goal; it is the greatest gift and mission we *ever* receive, and so the most significant day of our entire life is which? The day of our baptism.

United around the one mission of Jesus, let us today together step forward in faith. And so with great confidence in my heart, having listened to your request, I now solemnly promulgate Te Pārihi Katorika ki Ngāmotu, the Catholic Parish of New Plymouth, on this 6<sup>th</sup> day of September in the two thousand and fifteenth Year of the Lord. Amen.