

## **HOMILY: CCSL 17 September 2017 on**

### **125<sup>th</sup> celebration of CSC in Australia - Linda Mary**

#### **READINGS:**

Exodus 14. 19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14. 1-14; Matthew 18. 21-35

In the name of God, Source of all Being, Eternal Word and Breathe of Life.

The first Sisters of the Community of the Sisters of the Church arrived in Hobart on 16 September 1892. Seven Sisters, with five orphan girls and two lady helpers, set sail from England on 4 August in the 'Coptic'. They experienced heavy seas after the Cape, with Sr Bridget being knocked down by a huge wave and being rescued by one of the men and Sr Phyllis measuring her length on the floor with Sr May picking her up, after which they had a 'hearty laugh'. Then came ice and snow, with the captain needing to negotiate through icebergs day and night. Sr Phyllis wrote about their arrival in Hobart as, 'Here we are safe on dry land again...' which seems to say a lot! The angel or even angels of God, may have been with them but they did not have Moses driving the sea back giving them a dry passage through the ocean! Nor were they being pursued, rather the opposite – letters coming from Australia all begging Mother Emily to send Sisters to begin Anglican (in those days Church of England) schools were many. Mother Emily shared these letters with the Community and Sisters were asked to volunteer. A decision was made that seven Sisters would go. Six were chosen with Sr May joining them for the beginning of the educational work and other enterprises in Hobart, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney.

Mother Emily, founded our Community to pray and work to the honour and glory of God, for the coming of God's reign on earth. Our motto, Pro Ecclesia Dei (For the Church of God) gives expression to our task, and indeed the task of all Christians, to proclaim the primacy and sovereignty of God in our lives, living in love as Christ did for the world's healing and reconciliation with God. To give the Sisters an example, Mother Emily placed the Community under the patronage of Michael and the angels, whose beings pointed to a life of worship and active ministry, of mingled adoration and action.

This life of prayer and of active ministry was initially shown in meeting the perceived needs of the time in England: children needing to be fed and given the opportunity of education; for others, a place to live and be cared for as well as be educated; food for wharf workers in a time of strike and for homeless men and opening depots, the forerunner of Charity or Op Shops as we know them today. Mother Emily's zeal was to relate to people in a way that would give them dignity and respect and also to give them the opportunity to obtain skills that would enable them to find a way in life.

Those who originally wrote to Mother Emily inviting her to send Sisters to Australia saw a need for education that was readily available for children in Catholic Schools, but not in Church of England Schools. The attitude at the time supported this desire as being a necessary way forward in education and faith.

The Schools that opened in those early days did not always have an easy path yet their stories show the incredible tenacity of the Sisters and those who were supporting them to enable this vision of Church of England education to be realised.

St Michael's Collegiate School, Hobart opened on 3 October 1892

St Gabriel's School, Waverley began May 1893 (known as St Gabriel's from 1912)'s  
Burwood Boys' Home 1895

St Peter's Girls School, Adelaide 8 October 1894

St Michael's Grammar School, Melbourne 22 April 1895

Perth College 1902 and Parkerville Children's Home 1903

St Gabriel's (now CGGS and renamed as 1933 when sold by Sisters) Canberra  
10 June 1926

The Sisters in Australia continued to be involved in School education until the 1970's. St Gabriel's School at Waverley, was closed in 1966, with others in Perth, Melbourne, Adelaide and Hobart being relinquished by the Community later, to various governing bodies that have enabled these Schools to continue and grow into very viable and excellent education facilities. For some time the Community sought a new path to follow including education in different ways and pastoral work. Then we recognised the Community needed to return to a founding principal in The Rule, given to us by Mother Emily, from 2 Corinthians 5.18 'You, O God, were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself and have entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation.

I do not need to highlight the deep necessity for reconciliation between people and within our Australian society: with Aboriginal people of this land; between people of different races and customs. Different attitudes, priorities, gender and faith can incite fear and hatred.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, was addressing some areas of conflict causing division and pain. He was not willing to take sides over meat offered to idols, nor about values of certain days. He asks both sides not to pass judgement on others and to remember that it was to God that he and all people were accountable. Differences needed to be accepted so others could be treated with dignity and respect. For Paul, this was the way to bring people into a strong and creative community in Jesus Christ, who is the One who offers to all, through his death on the cross, the radical gift of God's grace, peace and unity.

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew begins with Jesus' response to Peter's question, '...how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus answers, 'Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times', and then tells the parable of the unforgiving servant. The servant had a very large debt – one that was way beyond any real possibility of the day. Jesus uses it to reveal the truth and extent of God's forgiveness – it too, is beyond any real possibility in that day and also today. The servant was unable to allow the forgiveness given to him to flow on to others so that they, too, could experience the freedom forgiveness can bring.

Forgiveness in the Gospel sense is not so much forgiveness of sin, but rather it is the challenge to open the way for people to be made whole. Forgiveness, receiving it and giving it to others, leads to life-giving reconciliation. It is costly for the one who forgives, and it is also costly for the one forgiven to accept forgiveness. We receive the gift of forgiveness from Jesus who forgives us and empowers us to give to others the generous gift of God's mercy, forgiveness and grace.

As I have endeavoured to enter into a ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation, I have come to understand more fully the life God is calling me to live in the Community. The giving of myself to God through the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience has and is changing how I relate, respond and engage with God, myself, others, and life situations. It has led me towards a greater dependence on God, a willingness to love others as God loves me and an obedience to God's call and particularly the responsibility that comes from being in leadership.

Today we are celebrating 125 years of the Sisters of our Community in Australia. Throughout all these years the Sisters have lived lives of worship and active ministry. At different times, the changing needs of society have demanded different responses, yet we are always called to be people through whom God's work of reconciliation can take place in the world. Amen.

A note to use later at commitment of Sisters and Associates.

Our Community is not only the Sisters. There have always been others who have committed themselves to work alongside and support the Sisters. Even before the first Sisters came to Australia the Community had friends and helpers, local secretaries as they were called, in Brisbane, Ballarat, Melbourne, Sydney, Tasmania and Adelaide who distributed "Our Work" (we call it the CSC Newsletter now). Today the Associates and friends of the Community continue faithful in prayer and service and we as the Community support them in prayer. Former students of each of the Schools continued to meet and welcome news of the Community as well as contact with Sisters. And the Schools have a sense of their connection to Mother Emily and meet as the Emily Group.