



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Archbishop Coleridge homily at the tomb of St Peter

On Monday, June 24, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference commenced its Ad Limina Apostolorum visit with Mass at the tomb of St Peter. This is Conference president Archbishop Mark Coleridge's homily.

In the years when I worked here, I would often walk through St Peter's from Santa Marta where I lived to the Palace yonder where I worked. Now and then I would think of St Peter, the Galilean fisherman lying beneath this grand pile and wonder what he makes of it. I would think of those haunting words at the end of John's Gospel which Jesus speaks to Peter: "When you grow old, someone else will put a belt around you and take you where you would rather not go".

How true that was: Simon came a long way from the shores of the lake on a journey he could never have dreamt of in those early days. To Rome, to crucifixion upside down not far from here, to a simple tomb over which would rise the greatest church in Christendom once Hagia Sophia had been lost in Constantinople and new St Peter's stood on the hill in old Rome.

It would occur to me at times that all this is simply a monument to the grandeur of the witness of the fisherman who lies beneath it all in the tomb around which we gather. The Basilica shows forth the glory of the grace that led Peter on a journey from the call by the lake through the drama of love and betrayal to the death that sealed it all. How right that the altar of Christ's own sacrifice was built over his tomb – in recognition that Peter's sacrifice was the Lord's own sacrifice, that he had, in Paul's words, "reproduced the pattern of the Lord's death" (Phil 3:10), had died the death that gives birth to unimagined life.

Here we recognize that we bishops are called to the same witness, the same sacrifice. We are called, like Peter, to show forth the power of the Lord's death and resurrection. The call has come to us in ways we didn't expect; our response to it through the years has been a complex interweaving of love and betrayal; the love that called us commissions us beyond betrayal and promises that when we grow old someone else will put a belt around us and take us where we would rather not go, indicating with these words the kind of death by which we will give glory to God. It's the love that says, "Follow me" without quite indicating where.

This is a time when our noses are being rubbed in our failures and frailties, a time of humiliation. But there is something of God in this – just as there was when Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" after Peter had three times denied him. The Lord's questions were rubbing Peter's nose in his own failures and frailties – but also in the commissioning beyond betrayal.

This hill was always a graveyard, since it lay outside the city limits within which no-one could be buried. In a sense, too, our lives are always a graveyard, a place where death is at work. But in this Vatican graveyard the great monument to Easter, this Basilica, rises – calling us to allow Easter to rise from the graveyard of our lives as we witness to him who is "the first-born from the dead" (Col 1:18). "Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her/Alone shall come fulfilment to our dreams/And our desires": so says the poet Wallace Stevens.

This is certainly true of John the Baptist whose birth we remember today. Like Jesus, like Peter and like us, John was born to die – but in order to give witness to the One who is life, he who is “the dawn from on high”, giving “light to those in darkness and the shadow of death” and who will “guide us into the way of peace”, the way of Easter. John’s birth was a cause of great joy, born as he was against all the odds. But his death, like Peter’s, must have seemed deeply tragic – no less so than the death of Jesus himself. Yet each of these deaths was a triumph, and that’s what this triumphant building proclaims – the second joy beyond the tragic, the deep, quiet joy that is triumphant without ever daring to be triumphalist.

For all the times I walked through St Peter’s on the way to work, I never grew used to this great church with its many layers. Every time it had on me the same effect that Hagia Sophia had on me the one time I entered it. It both awed me and embraced me. With its grandeur, St Peter’s makes you feel small; yet in a strange way you feel anything but insignificant. You feel both very small and very grand – like the little child of whom Zechariah foretells a great future.

The building leaves you in awe, feeling tiny – evoking as it does the majesty of God. But it also makes you feel very grand, makes your spirit expand – embodying also the divine condescension, the tenderness of God who, for all the divine majesty, stoops down to embrace us and make us his own. Peter and John must often have felt that way: small but grand because swept up into the majesty of God-with-us, the triumph of Easter, the joy beyond the vast sorrow.

In Australia this is a time surely when, beyond all the sorrows, we as bishops have to discover anew how small we are and yet how grand is the design into which we have been drawn by the call of God and his commissioning beyond our betrayals. It is a time for humiliation to give birth to humility. May the Galilean fisherman, the unlikely Princeps apostolorum at whose tomb we pray, be our companion and guide on the journey which for him is now finished but which for us continues still, as we prepare the way of the Lord. Amen.