

An appeal to History

Jesus answered, 'Yes I am a king. I was born for this, I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth, and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice.'

There are several ways of bearing witness to the truth, by word, by deed, by symbol. We attend here in this church, for long a symbol of the presence of Christ in this area, in this parish. When Fr Nolan came here and met Michael Lynch, there were about forty subscribing Catholics in Hawthorn. So they immediately set about building a church to hold 1,200 people. That's faith, that's confidence, that's a symbol.

However when we come here week after week, do we really look around it? When was the last time you looked at the stained glass windows in the nave? The donors' names are written on all save one and they appear in the parish website. When was the last time any of us looked along these windows? Have you ever thought of using them for prayer like we use decades of the rosary, and how often have we remembered the generous people who put them there?

The great windows of the chancel are not on the website, but each carries dedication to someone, and we are asked to pray for them. But we come regularly and rarely do we give a thought to the benefactors of long ago.

Have you noticed that on the floor in the transepts under about seat three, there is a different type of timber? Ever noticed? That was where the altar rails were in the first church, when the main altar was here; and here mass was said in 1869.

The windows at the top of the nave had stained glass in them once. They were taken out because it was considered to make the church too dark. Sometime?

The building tells the story, generation by generation of the people who worshipped here. There was a parishioner kneeling down the back in the 1930s when a storm dislodged a piece of stone from the steeple and it fell, straight through the roof. They say a parishioner's prayer was a trifle disturbed.

I was ordained in this church, and said mass on this altar during a major storm. In those days the new glass panels in the roof leaked appallingly. I had to put the host under the paten and seriously thought of calling for an umbrella. I believe the problem is fixed now.

Do you remember the work of art which hung above the altar? I don't know what it was, but it used to swing in a breeze and made me for one, distinctly nervous. One creative parishioner tied it to a pillar with a piece of rope. Is it true that it gave some of the younger parishioners nightmares? Perhaps you can tell me.

The first history of the parish was written in 1898 by Fr Morgan O'Brien and is on the parish website. Since then four more have been written and published in the parish magazine, then known as the monthly calendar, the last in 1968 by parishioner Alfred Phillips. We owe Mr Phillips a significant debt. But that was forty years ago and it is time to take stock of our history again, to attract the stories which have given

life to God and his church among the people of Hawthorn. If we leave it much longer, it will be lost. We do lose things. The faces on the wall facing Lynch Street. One is Fr George Kelly, the PP, another is Mr J Castles, who was significant in the St Vincent de Paul Society, but who knows who the others are? Sadly it seems their names are lost. The face on the wall above the nave looks very like Fr Oliver Daly, the first parish priest. It might be. The other four / six blocks were not used but were intended to be used. My suggestion to have the present Jesuit community memorialised as gargoyles has not been met with significant enthusiasm.

It would come as no surprise that one of the main topics of conversation in the parish was money and the principal way of raising money was the garden fete and bazaar. These procedures were held at St Joseph's and were big events; they ran for three days and late into the night. In 1903 the fete raised 315 pounds, five shillings and one penny, which was a considerable amount of money. The numerous winners of raffles and prizes were listed in the next issue of the parish newsletter. Amongst the winners was Miss Laffan of Park Street who won a large framed photograph of Fr Colgan, the parish priest. No doubt just what she always wanted. Miss Gertie Gray of Burwood won an elephant. There is no indication in the list whether it was a china elephant or a real elephant. I do suspect that leading an elephant up Burwood Road would create comment, even in 1903. Very Rev. Fr John Ryan won a crucifix. Really that looks rigged, but then you can't have the provincial superior going home on a tram with a china elephant.

Yes we know a lot about 1903, but do we know much about 2003?

There have been some wonderful people in this parish. Some of the older ones might remember Fr Patrick Harper. He used to visit families around the parish on a very regular basis. If you were out, he left a card under the door, 'While you were out, Fr Harper called.'

One family who had been away on holidays returned home to find their house had been broken into and much damage done. Under the front door a small white card, 'While you were out, Fr Harper called.'

I am here to ask you to help keep the story of your parish alive. The Jesuits don't own the church, the parishioners don't own the church, the archbishop does not own the church, but don't tell him, he thinks he does. No one owns the parish; we only lease it. We lease it from those who have gone before us and keep it in trust for those who come after us. Fr Dwyer needs the help of all the members of the parish who have lived here over the last forty years. Especially the help of those who think they have nothing to say; or think that everyone else would already know everything that they would say. Topics; liturgy, music, parish groups, justice and other issues, priests and people, caring for people, things that made you happy, made you smile, things that made you sad. Can you please drop him a note or letter, or send an email. It would be most appreciated.

Next week there is an ordination in this church for three Jesuit deacons. One of the hymns that will be sung is by Chris Willcock. Its chorus leads:

'We stand in the strength of those who have gone before us
We walk in the steps of those who have gone before us
God here beside us
God there before us'

The appeal for the story of the past is an effort to mark God's footsteps; and the footsteps of those who have stood here, before us. Christ became a witness to Pilate, we bear witness to our Christianity by being here in this church on this day. Our parish, our church, our presence all bear witness to Christ. Help us all to keep the story of that witness alive so we can hand it on, living and fresh, to those who come after us.

Fr Michael Head, SJ
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