

SAINTS AND MIRACLES

(Sermon for Sunday 13th October 2019 – Pentecost 18 – Luke 17:11-19)

Recently I was made a Canon of St Paul's Cathedral Sale at a lovely Service which quite a number of St Mary's parishioners attended. I was installed as a Canon and not canonized as some people suggested. In order to be canonized, I would have had to have been a **Catholic** Priest and have already died and have had a several proven miraculous cures accorded to people who had praying through me and sought my heavenly intercession for a cure which had then duly happened.



None of those things are true, and I doubt ever will be! Most of us, I am sure, remember the great local news coverage in Australia when our first ever Australian Saint was declared and canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on October 17th 2010 almost exactly nine years ago. That Australian was of course Mary McKillop, who is now officially known at St Mary of the Cross, though everyone still refers to her as St Mary McKillop.

Firstly, the process began when Mary McKillop was beatified, which is the beginning of the process to final canonization and so being declared a Saint. Beatification is where the Pope declares that a now-deceased person, who has led a truly inspiring and empowering life for others and has been a supreme example of Christlike living for the faithful to follow, may then be called "Blessed". This is the first stage before becoming a Saint in the Catholic Church. Mary McKillop was called "Blessed Mary McKillop" before she was petitioned by the Catholic Church in Australia to be made a saint after several medically declared miracles were deemed to have occurred under her intercession.



Mary McKillop was born in Fitzroy in Melbourne in 1842 of poor parents in a notoriously crime ridden part of the city. She had a very difficult and poverty-stricken early life. She trained as a teacher, and in time under the influence and encouragement of a local priest, she managed to found the Sisters of St Joseph or Josephites as they became known. This was the first religious Catholic order founded by an Australian woman. The Order was dedicated to the education of the very poor.

In 1866 she began a little school in the SA town of Penola. By 1867 there were 10 professed nuns and two years later in 1869 there were 70 professed sisters educating children across South Australia. The Order soon spread to Queensland and NSW and to Victoria. In these early days she came into serious conflict with the Catholic Bishop of Adelaide who excommunicated her in 1871 for her insubordination. He treated Sr Mary quite appallingly. She however was most gracious and tenacious and courageous and after a year the excommunication was reversed.

In 1873 she travelled to Rome to seek Papal approval for her Order and finally some 15 years later in 1888, Papal approval was finally granted. By this time the Josephites were to be found throughout Australia and New Zealand and the Pacific. Sister Mary died in 1909. She had been an inspiration to women in general, and especially in the Catholic Church, because of her patient and courageous and faithful tenacity in the face of indifference and of strong male hierarchical opposition. She had become a role model for women and a profound inspiration and empowerment to countless poor, often abused young girls and boys. She was truly a worthy person to be considered a saint.

But, what do we make of the church's need for attested miracles directly attributable to the spiritual intercession of the person proposed for sainthood? It is a very stringent and long drawn out procedure to be at first proposed and then made a saint of the church. Do such miracles as attested to the saints actually happen? I certainly believe they can and do happen, and shortly I will tell of a profound personal experience of one such miracle.

The New Testament is full of miracle stories. This morning's Gospel reading is about the healing by Jesus of ten lepers from, as it was then, their incurable and much-feared disease. Jesus performed, over his three-year ministry, many miracles of many different sorts. There were the purely physical healings and then there were those miracles that seemed to make change to the natural order of things. Such miracles were the changing of water into wine, or the feeding of 5000 people with a mere five loaves and two fish, or Jesus walking on water, or stilling a raging storm at sea, or Jesus raising the dead back to life. St Peter and St Paul and others in the New Testament early Church also performed many miracles in the name of Jesus Christ during the growth and expansion of the Christian Church.

Miracles do happen and can either be powerfully effected through the divinely appointed presence and intercession of a particular saint, or through the healing ministry and prayer of ordinary faithful everyday saints like you and I. By people who are faithfully committed to belief in the healing power of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes physical healing occurs. Sometimes it does not. Sometimes the healing is almost immediate and overtly and powerfully miraculous. Sometimes the healing is gentle and almost imperceptibly given. Why is it that sometimes healing is observed and other times it is not? Why is healing sometimes instant and at other times much more drawn out? There is, of course, no straightforward answers to these questions.

God always works somehow in and through our prayers. Sometimes we can see it, and sometimes we can't. Sometimes, we can only see it much later in hindsight. I think more often than not we seem to just get in the way of God's healing action by our lack of full trust, or our lack of commitment to change in ourselves and in others in order for healing to happen and flourish. We note in the Gospel story this morning, that ten lepers were apparently healed. Jesus said they were healed. But, remember, there is the important coda to the story. Only one of the ten men comes back to give thanks to Jesus and to God for his healing.

Jesus is amazed that the only one who comes back is a despised Samaritan who should have been the least likely to come back and give thanks to God. Jesus says to this Samaritan man: *"Your faith has made you well."*

The other nine men were, it seems, healed of their leprosy but they hadn't made any spiritual changes in their lives. They weren't grateful to God and desirous of God's full presence in their lives. They were healed in a sense but they were not well in the wholeness of their well-being. Prayerful healing seems to be at least a two-part process. It involves both a physical and spiritual aspect and usually as well a lifestyle and emotional aspect and perhaps others. So, it can be for us in healing from any medical problem we may have. We can be healed of something but unless we change our lifestyle and stress levels and gain some inner peacefulness then we will not be fully healed and well. Similarly, we need to give thanks to God for any physical healing in our life from illness we may have, for then we will have deeper spiritual healing as well.

I mentioned earlier a miraculous healing story that I was involved in many years ago. I had baptized the baby daughter of a young married couple. The husband had no religious background and the mother was raised Greek Orthodox, but she didn't want her daughter raised in the rigidity of that religious background. The husband and wife became regulars at our Anglican church and the husband decided to be baptized himself and later to prepare for Confirmation. Not long after his Confirmation, their daughter, now about three years old, became seriously ill with meningococcal meningitis. She was critically ill and in isolation at the Children's Hospital. The doctors thought she may not last the night. I was there with the parents, and we were all robed up in sterile gowns as the little girl struggled for life.

She was in high fever and kept asking for water to drink, but, for medical reasons, she was not allowed to have any water.

The father was in agony at his daughter's distress and finally, in desperation, after we said some prayers, he cried out, ***"Jesus please give her a drink of water!"***

Then his daughter amazingly said, echoing her father, ***"Jesus please give me a drink of water!"***

Then she fell quiet all of a sudden.

She gulped strongly several times and then said, ***"Thank you Jesus"*** and she went into a deep peaceful sleep.

When the specialist came in about an hour later, he was dumb-founded. The little girl's fever had completely abated and her vital signs had improved miraculously. He couldn't explain it. The father then told the doctor exactly what had happened and that Jesus himself had intervened and a miracle had occurred. The daughter made a full recovery and went on to live a strong happy life.

Miracles do happen. Let us give thanks to God for any healings we have ourselves or see in others. Let us never fail to offer our prayers for others and not lose hope even when the healing we may desire is not always the healing that may happen. Miracles do occur and we can in prayer be a living part in ministry with the saints in heaven.