

ST MARY OF THE CROSS MACKILLOP

1Kings 17:8-16

Col 3:12-17

Mt 6:24-34

Today we celebrate the feast of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop, Australia's first saint. Mary was born in 1842 in Fitzroy, Victoria, a very poor, working class area at that time. Her parents were Scottish immigrants and the hardships she endured probably raised her awareness to the plight of the needy.

Today's first reading tells of Elijah asking a poor widow for food, who despite her own needs shared what she had with him. God rewarded her. St Paul tells the Colossians that Jesus' disciples should clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility and patience. Above all, these virtues must be protected with the cloak of love. Inscribed on Mary MacKillop's tomb in North Sydney are the words, "Remember that we are but travellers here." Although she did travel a great deal, her words describe the journey of seeking the Kingdom of God which leads us into his presence both here and in eternity. Jesus presents this to us as our priority – "Seek ye first the Kingdom, and then all things will be added to you" (Mt 6:33).

Mary MacKillop was a true disciple of Jesus. At 14 years old she went out to work to support her younger siblings. Later she became a governess to her uncle's children in Penola, South Australia. It was there that she met Fr Julian Tennison Woods who became a significant figure on her journey.

In 1866 she eschewed normal clothing and donned a simple black dress, so becoming the first of the Sisters of St Joseph, a new Religious Order and was encouraged in this by Fr Woods. With him she opened her first St Joseph's School in a disused stable in Penola, South Australia. Other women joined her and in 1867 she made her vows as Sr Mary of the Cross under the Order's Rule written by Fr Woods. It was a pretty harsh Rule of Life but it allowed the sisters to live **in** the general community rather than living **as** a community. This enabled them to move across dioceses as need occurred, a privilege that caused her trouble later. As the Community grew, the sisters adopted a plain brown habit and became known as Brown Joeys.

Mary was a feisty woman. She was fiercely independent, a skilled fund raiser and very principled in how she undertook the Josephite mission. Her schools were open to everyone whether or not they could afford the fees. She refused to accept any money from the Government for her schools and her unwillingness to be browbeaten by the Church Hierarchy meant she had influential enemies, especially in the Adelaide Diocese. She blew the whistle on a child abusing priest in that Diocese and was falsely accused of being an alcoholic. She drank brandy purely for medicinal purposes! The bishop was weak and succumbed to pressure from her enemies and she was excommunicated in 1871 for a time until the bishop rescinded this on his deathbed and apologised to her.

She wasn't going to be pushed around by bishops and clergy, so she went to Rome alone and somehow scored a personal interview with Pope Pius IX who personally approved the Rule

of Life for the Order if it was made less austere for the sisters. Mary died on August 8th in the Community's house in North Sydney in 1909 and was canonised by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010.

Mary MacKillop was known for her kindness and encouragement of others. She invited the sisters to live poorly, rely on divine providence, go wherever they were needed, do good and remedy evil wherever they were able to do so. She speaks the same words to us today, so that whoever we are and whatever the circumstances in which we find ourselves, we are called to love those we encounter, steering away from being unduly attached to or possessed by material goods, and trust in the providence of God who loves us.

May St Mary of the Cross pray for Australia and the Catholic faithful during our difficult times and we pray that we may be inspired by her faithfulness.

Msgr Harry Entwistle
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