

Sermon Feast of All Saints Patronal Festival 2018

If we cast our mind back to 160 years ago, we might recall that on All Saints Day 1858 the settlement of Melbourne was just 25 years old. The fledging township had in recent years been given a significant boost by the activity of the Victorian goldfields. But not much happening in this area. Of course, 160 years ago, this neighbourhood was very different indeed. There was some activity happening further down Chapel Street, but mostly the area was small farm holdings and scrub and wetlands. John Gregory – a young, energetic, priest, and himself a pioneer pastor of the Bendigo goldfields - was called here to be founder and priest of this parish. The parish then was the size of a small English diocese, which goes some way to explaining the ambitious scope of the original plans for this church. But really, he was just a man ambitious for God. (Oh! That we were all ambitious for God!!) When the first stage of building was completed here in 1862 - the first three bays of the nave you now are seated in – the church would have appeared as something of a medieval cathedral. Decades before it was obscured by the Astor opposite and Gregory Hall next door, this church was the one substantial building in the area, towering above everything else around.

John Gregory held to the distinct catholic conviction that buildings *matter*; that our churches are not simply meeting halls in which we receive instruction (as churches function in the protestant imagination). Rather, they are places which in themselves declare the mystery of faith and in which God can be encountered. To this end, Gregory spent the rest of his 34-year tenure in this place crafting a temple according to his own vision in which God would be glorified and saints be made. For that is what a church is: *a place where saints are made*. And so, in the latter decades of the 19th century in this place was crafted a space of beauty, of faith and hope. Crafted with the singular conviction that this place could lead ordinary men and women to an encounter with God; that the people of St Kilda and surrounds could meet and know God in *this place*.

Because at the very heart of Christian faith is the conviction that God can *indeed* be encountered. God, not simply an idea, not merely a power or energy. God not simply the divine architect or engineer. God not just the force infusing creation. No. But a Person who desires to be known and *can* be known, as all salvation history as witnessed in the Scriptures shows. God can be encountered. We can know him. And it is the saints - all whom we celebrate and honour today - who *prove* the truth of this claim. The saints who have had a living encounter with God, who *knew* Him.

Now, in the catholic vision of things, our churches help communicate this important truth: that even on earth we can anticipate and share in our destiny in heaven, where we will see and know God perfectly. Our churches can point us to heaven even as they remain firmly anchored in earth. What care and thoughtful planning was undertaken by Gregory (and those who followed him) to construct a church which so powerfully speaks *the faith*, which declares the mystery of God's beauty, which assures us that God can be known! That can only happen from a place of confidence (and trust!) that God can truly take the ordinary to lead us to the holy; confidence and trust that this place might – faltering and staggeringly - help lead us to the homeland of heaven.

Now, this confidence and trust really only comes by accepting what God has shown – revealed to us – in Jesus: that in God choosing a *body* for himself in Jesus, he has redeemed the entirety of the creation. We cannot despise the things of earth because God has taken the things of earth to show himself to us. So, wood, stone, bronze and iron, glass, wine and oil, fire and water can speak to us of eternal truths. The things of earth point us to the things of the heaven. The ordinary and the elemental can be fashioned and ordered and set aside to lead us to the divine! Such is the grace of God. The temporal leads us to the eternal! God takes the things of earth to reveal God's very self.

We often face the temptation to see art, decoration, fine craftsmanship (all on show here!) as somehow superfluous. Maybe nice, but not essential. But it is through the beauty of the worship of the church on earth we are inserted into and join with the worship of the church in heaven. And, in the great and holy task for us to communicate something of the mystery of God our beauty *here* reminds us of the profound truth, *God himself* is Beauty.

The great task of our lives – all of us – is to make something beautiful for God. Now, in a way, a monument of stone, glass, marble, iron, brass, paint is the easy part! Yes, it may help form us in the faith, and help impart truth of the faith. But it cannot be a substitute for the living encounter with the Person Jesus Christ upon which true faith rests. Yes, here has been crafted something beautiful for God, a gift for God's glory. But the greatest thing built for God's glory – what God himself *makes* for himself – is his saints. We may well build and maintain a worthy and beautiful church for God's glory. But God builds *for himself* saints for his glory.

One of the towering figures of the church's early centuries, Saint Irenaeus, declared: *The glory of God is the human person fully alive.* This is why we say the saints show the glory of God. It is they who have become 'fully alive'. At a time in which men and women largely claim to be able to build their lives without God - who live as if God had nothing to say to them - lives of faithful witness, of humble believing, of firm conviction, of loving charity, can show those around us (the broken and lost mass of humanity) that God *is real* and seeks to know *them*.

Benedict XVI has said, *I have often affirmed my conviction that the true apology of Christian faith, the most convincing demonstration of its truth...are the saints and the beauty that the faith has generated.* Beauty dedicated to the glory of God and beautiful lives dedicated to the glory of God is what will transform and heal our world. And it is the saints who have been captivated by the Beauty of God. They spend their lives working toward this. The saints witness to the great truth that God is beautiful, that he should be adored with beauty and that our redeemed nature and our destiny is beatific.

Our celebration today of All the Saints, but also what we celebrate later in the week - the 160th anniversary of the laying of the foundation of this building - is indeed of great significance. In this physical structure we are reminded that God is the true measure of humankind; that the secret of authentic, full, abundant life consists, is in building a life oriented to God. Now, through this building we are presenting to the world a God who is the friend of humankind, who comes. But through *the* church that makes this church its home, we invite men and women to become friends of God.

The glory of God is the human person fully alive. God does not call us to mediocrity, to the trivial or uninspiring. He calls us to what is most real, most true. He is the truest truth, the most real reality! He calls us to full, abundant life. This, we know is *possible*, as seen in the witness of the saints. In and through the church, *we too* can build lives according to God's plan. Christ *can be* our foundation. We *can* cooperate with his design for us. We *can* construct hearts, minds, wills, desires according to his vision. Brother and sisters, we *can be* saints captivated, oriented to the vision of our homeland. We *can* build something beautiful for God. Amen.