

For the past six weeks we have been celebrating Easter. In some sense we have been walking with the disciples as they come to know Jesus risen. They have been called to know him by faith and not just by seeing him in the flesh. We recall the words of the risen Jesus to Thomas when he said, “you believe because you have seen me; blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe”. Of course, none of us has seen the risen Jesus, but we have been hearing his teaching, and we have been hearing about the new life that he gives to those who believe him. I think it would be fair to say that over these six weeks our faith has deepened. This may not always be discernible to us, but the fact that we have pondered what happened to Jesus and that we celebrated his death and resurrection means that God has been with us and that God is strengthening our faith.

On this feast of the Ascension, Jesus departs from his disciples. The readings we have just heard tell us two things about the future his disciples face. The first is that from then onwards, they will have to live without him being with them in the way he had been in the previous years. They feared they would be alone, but he assured them that he would send the Paraclete to help them. The second thing is that from then onwards they had to live as witnesses to him and the gospel he preached. We might wonder what being a witness might entail. I think it has taken shape in different ways at different moments in history. Over these weeks we have heard about the first generation of disciples and how they not only faced opposition but how they saw this opposition as their way to give witness to the opposition that Jesus faced and that led to his death. The message we heard was clear. Even when there was opposition, the Christian community grew and flourished.

If we think of the early days of the Christian presence in Australia, there are fine examples of witnesses to Jesus and his gospel. I think about the efforts in education and healthcare that marked the Catholic community at that time. Having reflected on the gospel message of Jesus, the people of that time recognised that there were some in the community who did not have access to school education because they lived in remote areas or because they were poor. So, they set up schools. It was a similar thing for health care, when hospitals were set up to care for the poor. Much of this was done by religious sisters and brothers, but it involved the whole community. People supported the religious sisters and brothers, and they gave of their own time and energy to make sure that education and healthcare could happen.

The story is similar in other parts of the world. There have been many times when I have heard people tell me that their experience of Catholic schools in Hong Kong and the witness of the teachers, made an impression on them. It eventually led them to enquire about the faith and to seek baptism. This is a wonderful example of being a witness.

Jesus' message before his ascension – that we are to be witnesses – is just as relevant and important today as it was for those first generations. We live in a different time to the first Christian generation. We also live in a different time to the early Catholic pioneers in Australia. Their witness has borne fruit. The question we can ask ourselves today is, where are we called to be witnesses. Let me suggest that we should look at the world and the times in which we live. Many people across the planet are suffering as a result of war. It is almost as if war is the first response to dealing with difficult times or difficult relationships. What goes on between nations soon spreads to the streets, to playgrounds and to homes. I have heard it said that we are experiencing an epidemic of aggression and violence. We have lost the capacity to seek peace.

If this is the situation of our world today, how shall we respond to Jesus' farewell command? In many ways, it is all beyond us. None of us feels that we can change world events. That is true, but I don't think being a witness means that we have to change world events. To be a witness is to live the message that Jesus taught. In our context, it means that in the midst of violence we would show what a difference having inner peace makes. In the midst of examples of hatred, we would show what loving our neighbour looks like. In the midst of the darkness of despair that many people feel, we would be a light that shines a pathway to peace. Peace and love and life are at the heart of Jesus' message. All he calls us to is to be a witness to these gifts. The Holy Spirit will work through our witness.

There is one other thing that Jesus told his disciples before he left them. It was that they will never be witnesses without his help. He promised them the Holy Spirit who would empower them to be witnesses. Before he ascended, he told them to go to Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. In the coming week as we prepare for Pentecost, let's take time to pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Come, Holy Spirit, renew the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love. Come Holy Spirit, renew the face of the world.