



## **Bishop Shane's Chrism Mass Homily**

**26 March 2024**

For most of us, this is not the first Chrism Mass that we have participated in. These are familiar patterns, as we gather year after year as part of our annual preparations for Easter, moving from Ash Wednesday at the beginning of Lent through Palm Sunday at the beginning of Holy Week, to today's Mass where we bless the oils that will be used in sacraments across the Diocese throughout the coming year. At this stage, plans are well advanced in communities across the Diocese for the Easter Triduum, which we will celebrate in a few days' time. That pattern of our liturgical life has been going on now in the Diocese for 150 years. It might feel like there's something very stable about that, and in one sense there is. But, as we look back over the 150 years that we mark this year, the pattern has changed dramatically, and much more so than in the particular experience of any of our lives.

When Bishop Crane – whose ring, pectoral cross and crosier I use today – arrived as the first Bishop of the Diocese in 1875 with a handful of fellow Augustinian priests that he brought with him from Ireland, they were met by Dr Henry Backhaus here in Bendigo (or Sandhurst as it was known then) and the pioneering priests from the other three original missions of the Diocese, in Beechworth, Wangaratta and Heathcote. At that stage, the communities weren't called parishes, but missions, each encompassing enormous territories with a number of chapels and a rapidly growing number of Catholics.

These mission communities were fairly scattered and disconnected from one another, without much sense of being part of a Diocese as such. So, we can imagine that the Diocese's first Chrism Mass, celebrated in the Pro-cathedral of St Kilian's, would have been a fairly small affair, even though in some respects, the Christian community in this region was well established. It was more than twenty years since the first Mass was celebrated beside the Bendigo Creek in 1852; and at St Kilian's itself, the original church of 1852 had already

been replaced by a new church in 1857, which was itself to be replaced after thirty years when it was discovered that it was too heavy for its foundations and was replaced by something lighter while a permanent solution was developed. After nearly 140 years, we're still all very attached to that temporary solution, I must say!

But at the time of that first Chrism Mass, travel was still very arduous and time-consuming, and it's unlikely that priests from the communities of the northeast or places other than Bendigo would have attended. It would have been a very small celebration indeed.

Up until then, the oils used in the celebrations of the sacraments would have been blessed by Bishop James Alipius Goold, who had been appointed as the first bishop of the new Diocese of Melbourne in 1847. I'm not sure how the priests were resupplied, but they certainly would have used the oils with great abundance, and in great quantities. Dr Backhaus alone celebrated over 4,000 baptisms in his first decade here in the Bendigo Goldfields, and there would have been similar efforts by pioneering priests in other parts of the Diocese like William Tierney, John Kennedy, George Galen and Nicholas Bassetto.

In the decades after that, the gold rush ended here and in the north-east, and the various activities associated with gold mining were gradually replaced by farms, vineyards, orchards and businesses. As towns developed, scattered right across this vast area, churches and schools were built too, culminating in the building of this extraordinary Cathedral that we are so fortunate to have as part of our Diocese, opened in 1901 and completed in 1977.

We should be particularly proud of the schools in our Diocese, that have resulted from the commitment of communities across many generations, who were determined to ensure that there is a quality, Catholic education available for all our young people. Through most of that time, this was without the government support that is so integral to our operations today. So in earlier times, Catholic schooling was only possible because of the commitment and generosity of local communities, who often literally built the schools themselves, and because of the extraordinary contribution of generations religious women and men from a variety of religious congregations.

We have been blessed throughout our history as a Diocese by the arrival of migrants. From the earliest days of the Diocese, migrants came from Ireland and England. In the first half of



the twentieth century, people came from many countries of Europe, and then in the 1970s, beginning with people from Vietnam, we have welcomed an extraordinary diversity of people from various countries of Asia, India, Africa and the Middle East. We've been enormously enriched by people of those cultures and the priests who have come with them or alongside them, by the culture that they bring, and the faith that they share with us. That has been highlighted for me personally over the last year as I visited the families of many of our priests in India and in the Philippines.

So, across those 150 years that we've been a Diocese celebrating Chrism Masses, the face of the Diocese has actually looked very different at different times. Through all that change, there have been three constants, which we are reminded of in today's readings, which we hear each year at this Chrism Mass.

In the first reading from Isaiah and in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus quotes that text from Isaiah, we hear the mission of Jesus that he announces when he enters the synagogue at Nazareth: to bring good news to the poor; to bind up hearts which are broken; to bring liberty to captives – to those who are bound up, restrained and held up; to bring sight to the blind – those who can't see the way forward; to set the downtrodden free – bringing care and encouragement for those who are struggling. That has always been the mission of the Christian people. It has been the mission of the local Church in this place throughout our history, and it continues to be our mission today.

The second constant is about change, about living out our mission in a way that responds to the particular blessings and challenges of each generation – through experiences of war and peace; through pandemics; through times of prosperity and times of hardship. In our own time, one of the challenges that we face are the decline of smaller communities, at the same time that we see growth in larger centres. So, there are increasing challenges to provide services, including Church services, for those who live in small communities. Paradoxically, in this time when communication and travel is so much easier, some of our community are perhaps facing a new experience of isolation, remoteness and disconnection.

We also live amidst a growing polarisation across our communities – certainly politically, and also to an extent in our Church experience. This polarisation is taking place in a context

of growing secularisation and focus on individuals, with less interest and engagement in religious experiences and institutions.

Another challenge is the increasing need to take shared actions to protect our environment and care for our common home.

And we live in a time when we are struggling to find ways for meaningful recognition and justice for our indigenous people, whose ancient bond with this land and its waterways stretches back countless generations, way before European settlement in this land. We profess our commitment to reconciliation, but making progress towards that is something that still eludes us as a community. After the very clear failure of last year's referendum on the Voice, efforts to pursue reconciliation and justice have become even more difficult, and there is much healing needed for those who had such high hopes at the prospect of formal recognition and a structure where they could be heard.

Finally, we live in a time where Pope Francis has called us to continue our mission as Jesus' followers in a way that renews us synodally, in a way where we grow in our commitment to walk together and move forward on our shared journey as followers of Jesus – through our living out his mission, our participation in co-responsibility for our shared life, and our building up the communion of the People of God. At a diocesan level, we have taken significant steps towards this by establishing our Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Council, which was commissioned at this Mass last year. Responding to the Pope's call to become more synodal is also prompting renewal and conversion in the life of our parish communities, and also in the way that we shape and govern the work of our school communities and of our social services.

So, that is the second constant: in living out and pursuing the ongoing mission of Jesus, we have always sought to recognise and respond to the particularities of the situation in which we find ourselves.

The third constant is one that we heard proclaimed in the second reading, which is that we are people of hope. We are called to respond to the challenges of our own time with confidence and hope, which we profess and renew today. We look towards God's future, confident that, whatever occurs, all our achievements and all our disappointments are part



of God's plan, which goes far beyond what we can imagine. In that plan, Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, as we heard in the reading. He is the Alpha: the beginning of all of our beginnings, the beginning that underlies and makes possible anything that we attempt. And he is the Omega: the end of all that we pursue, the end that lies beyond anything that we might achieve and that brings our works and our efforts to a fulfilment that goes beyond what we could have ever imagined – the fullness of God's plan and God's love for us and all of creation.

And so, as we look back with thanks on the first 150 years of our Diocese, and look forward with confidence and hope in the future that God is building in us, I now ask each of you to recommit yourselves to your path in the Christian life: to renew your commitment to living as baptised followers of Jesus, as professed religious, or as ordained ministers of God's Church.