

Corpus Christi Parish
27 August 2008, 7.00pm

Ecclesiastes 3:1-10; Matthew 5:1-12

It's always hard to say farewell to old friends. The story of the Oblates in Leeds goes back more than 150 years. It begins, I suppose, with the potato famine in Ireland the 1840s, when so many families were forced to leave their homes, mainly going to England and America. Since then families of Irish descent have come to form a significant proportion of the populations in both countries and have played a notable part in the life of those countries.

Many of those who came to England in the 1840s settled in Leeds. They looked for manual work in the coal mines, the cotton mills, in road making and so on. Theirs was a tough life. Most of them settled in East Leeds on The Bank, as Richmond Hill was known. They lived in great poverty and squalor in desperately cramped and insanitary conditions, and disease was rife.

In the 1840s there were only two Catholic missions in Leeds – St Mary's in an upper room in Lady Lane, and St Patrick's in the east of the city. It was not until this time that the Catholic Church in this country was formally recognised and officially existed. Up to then Catholic churches and chapels had been allowed, but only on sufferance; then gradually we became an accepted feature of public life. In this slow journey to an albeit grudging acceptance many individuals and groups played a significant part. Among them were the immigrants from Ireland and the priests and sisters who came with them or followed on later.

A chance encounter in a railway carriage in 1851 led to the Oblates coming to Leeds. George Crawley who worked at the orphanage on The Bank met a Fr Robert Cooke on a train at Marsh Lane Station; he was on his way to Clifford. They talked for a couple of hours about the plight of the immigrants. That very night Fr Cooke went to The Bank. He celebrated Mass in the orphanage prayer room the following morning.

He was obviously a man of action. Immediately he wrote to Bishop Briggs of the Diocese of Beverley (which included Leeds), and Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, founder of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, and obtained permission to found a third mission in Leeds. A group of sisters associated with the OMI priests, the Sisters of the Holy Family of Bordeaux, also came to help with the mission; they at once set about doing something for the children's education.

Mass moved to a converted dance hall which was part of the Spitalfields pub. Within 2 years enough money had been raised to start the construction of the church of Mount St Mary's which was opened in July 1857, and was extended and completed in 1866. It was sad that just 120 years

later circumstances forced its closure, though the nearby secondary school still flourishes.

Inner city slum clearance led to shifts in population and many who had lived on The Bank were re-housed in Wykebeck and Halton. The OMIs established a mission there and soon set up a parish. The Holy Family Sisters also opened a convent. An Oblate priest, Fr Michael O’Ryan, negotiated with the city authorities for a site for a school and a church. Mass was at first celebrated in a hut, then in the school, until a new church opened in 1937 on the feast of Corpus Christi. Despite being almost destroyed by fire in 1950, this building served until the present fine church was built in 1962.

The chronicle of the Diocese of Leeds is a wonderful history in which the Oblates have played a significant part. It is sad now to have to bid them farewell. But the first thing I want to do is to say to them “Thank you”. You have done so much in your time in this diocese to ensure that the poor would be supported, that the young would be educated, and that the faith would be taught. There is of course a great deal more to your work among us – not least the example and support you have given in different ways to the diocesan clergy. Along with our profound thanks to you for your long and fruitful ministry among us, we wish you every blessing in your future work wherever that may take you. And of course there is that great company of witnesses whom you have served over the years who even now will be praying for you – of that you can be sure.

That well-known passage from Ecclesiastes (3:1-8) that we heard a few moments ago, about there being a right time for anything, is always worth reflection. There is a time to leave and to move to pastures new. The phrase I want to remind you of is: “I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him”. There will of course in your time here have been good days and bad days; that’s inevitable because however closely God has been guiding us, we are human and are none of us is perfect. But the really important thing to hold onto, it seems to me, is that the whole enterprise is truly God’s work, so it cannot fail.

Along with every farewell there is also a welcome. I wonder, therefore, if I may offer just a word to your new parish priest, Fr Dennis Cassidy. I realise that his official induction will be later, but in the meantime may I simply say on behalf of all the parishioners, “Welcome”.

I’m glad, too, that we were reminded what Jesus said to the crowds. Be sure that he would say the same to us now. Whatever the memories, you and all of us should indeed “rejoice and be glad”, and your reward will surely be great. So go in peace, with joy, with thanksgiving, and with hope.