

St Andrew

This evening we are fulfilling Father Michael's own wish by celebrating the solemnity of St Andrew, the first of the Twelve Apostles called by Jesus. Michael didn't leave any instructions but we know that this solemnity, as it is in Scotland, was important to him. Celebrating St Andrew is also a way of showing our gratitude to his Scottish family members who gave him to Don Bosco's work. We are also in this way thanking the province that sent him as a missionary to us.

Saint Andrew is the Patron of many countries, and is revered especially in Patras where the major part of his relics is kept. A Greek monk, or some say an Irish assistant of St Columba by the name of Regulus, had a vision to warn him to take the relics 'to the ends of the earth' for their safe-keeping. So Regulus headed west and was shipwrecked off the coast of Scotland and so it was that the relics arrived at the end of the earth! These relics were lost during the reformation, but in 1969 Pope Paul VI gave Cardinal Gray further relics with the words: 'St Peter gives you his brother'.

Matthew 4:18-22

It is as 'the brother of Peter' that Saint Matthew introduces Andrew in his Gospel, when Jesus invited them to leave their nets and become fishers of men. Twice in today's gospel, St Matthew says of those first four apostles that they left their nets *at once* and followed Jesus.

This promptness of response to the Lord's call can be seen in *our brother*, Michael. He left home while still a schoolboy to go to the Salesian Missionary College in Shrigley. Shrigley was to play a big part in his life. It is a beautiful place on the edge of Cheshire but really part of the moor land of the Derbyshire hills. After ordination he returned there as a teacher for a year and again in 1970 to guide the community as its rector.

It was in the rugged surroundings of Shrigley that he would have learned much of his resilience, simplicity of lifestyle and his ability to communicate these qualities to young vocations.

During the late seventies, Fr Michael spent three years promoting the Salesian vocation in Scotland.

150th Jubilee of the Founding of the Salesians

A vocation to Salesian life is a precious gift and the completion of Father Michael's life is another part of our celebration of thanks on the 18th December for the 150 years since Don Bosco started our way of life with the nineteen who vowed themselves to stay with him in his work for youth. These first Salesians were mostly young people themselves, some of them still in their teens.

Romans 10:9-18

Paul told the Romans of his concern for those who do not know of what the Lord has to offer. 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But they will not ask his help unless they believe in him and they will not believe in him unless they have heard of him, and they will not hear of him unless they get a preacher, and they will not get a preacher unless one is sent. The footsteps of those who bring good news are a welcome sound.'

A Salesian in a school situation may seem at first glance to be simply a teacher of whatever subject is his speciality. However, there are many ways of bringing good news. The dedication of a teacher, his kindness and availability are all messages for the young and make them open to explicit good news that can come in prayer and catechism classes.

In the Service of Christ the King

In 1951, Fr Michael was not yet ordained but like all of us started his teaching and was form master of the third form, I still remember the enthusiasm he aroused in those young lads to be in the service of Christ the King. As Paul says, 'faith comes from what is preached, and what is preached comes from the word of God.'

A Salesian vocation is also a community affair. We are called to follow Jesus, but within a community, and Jesus spent much of his time binding his apostles together in love and service of each other. 'This is how others will know that you are my disciples!'

My early memory of sharing in community life with Michael as an aspirant, a novices, a student of philosophy and theology is a happy one. We were made even more dependent on one another when three of us were sent to run an English Language School in Italy in 1957. It became an enriching experience in this sharing of responsibility and it further enhanced our friendship.

What we do as Salesians is part of the preaching we do as a community while the specific task we do can be very varied and perhaps not always to our own taste. I never found being an economer quite to my own taste! Father Michael carried the task of provincial economer for six or seven years. In response to the needs of the time, it involved persuading his confreres to make changes to bring about further unification of the province. I don't know the details of this period of his life but I'm sure it could not have been easy for him and I am told that his work for the provincial community is still bearing fruit today.

For the last twenty one years, Father Michael has been involved in parish work – in Glasgow, in Mitchell's Plain, in Liverpool and finally here in

Johannesburg. However, even while engaged in the finances of the province he was already spending his spare time in pastoral activity.

Paul poses a question: 'Is it possible that they did not hear the good news?' and answers it himself: 'Indeed they did; in the words of the psalm, their voice has gone out through all the earth, and their message to the ends of the world.'

After years of service in the British province, Father Michael took his 'rest' by making himself available to us in Southern Africa. It is to this that we are witnesses:

Did you not find in Father Michael someone who was available when needed?

Have you not received his compassion in pain and sorrow, enthusiasm in your joys and celebrations?

When celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation with him, did you not recognise in him Christ's welcome for the sinner, restoring your confidence in Christ's love?

I have and will miss him.

Wisdom 3:1-9

There is consolation for us in the Book of Wisdom in a passage chosen for the Solemnity of St Andrew:

The souls of the virtuous are in the hands of God.

His going is not a disaster ... he is in *peace* – resting in the happy security of intimacy with God.

His hope is rich with *immortality* – in companionship with God.

He has been put to the *test* and found worthy to be with God.

Now he understands the *truth* – that our end is one of glorification, of being where Jesus reigns.

'Those who are faithful will live with him in love; for grace and mercy await those he has chosen.'

Responsorial psalm 31

Together with our brother Michael we praise and thank God this evening with the lament of psalm Thirty One, which the Church uses to express its response to St Andrew's death on a Cross:

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

Be a rock of refuge for me,
a mighty stronghold to save me,
for you are my rock, my stronghold.

I trust in the Lord,
let me be glad and rejoice in your love.
Let your face shine on your servant,
save him in your love.

Into your hands, O Lord, we commend his spirit.
Amen.

An unscripted epilogue

Yesterday after finalising what I was going to say this evening, I went to our community chapel to pray but felt restless there so went over to our garden Way of Light to wander slowly around the fourteen stations. Below each of the Icons of the Resurrection is a brief quotation from scripture and I found myself reading these in a new light.

Beneath the first icon, the women at the empty tomb, are the words: "Why are you looking among the dead for one who is alive?" It struck me that in reflecting on the readings for the solemnity of St Andrew I had been looking for Michael among the dead. I was celebrating a memorial of his life to join it with the memorial of the Mass to give praise and thanks, the object of a homily. But was I missing its full meaning?

I am used to understanding my baptism as dying with Christ. I know that as a Christian I must follow him by carrying his cross and trust that he has gone before me to prepare a place for me. Yet it is more than this. The whole of Christ's life lived in obedience to his Father's will stands as a witness for the whole of my life and for the whole of Michael's life, including resurrection.

"Why was I looking among the dead for one who is alive?"

And so it was that other gospel quotations came alive:

When Peter and John came to the Tomb, "They saw and they believed"

How like I am to the Disciples on way to Emmaus:

"How foolish you are; how slow you are to believe everything"

"Stay with us, the day is nearly over" and

"They recognised him in the breaking of Bread"

We too can allow the comforting words of Jesus to heal us as we celebrate this Vigil Mass:

"Peace be with you"

"Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven"

and hear again the command of Jesus as Michael heard it:

"Go through the whole world and preach the gospel to all"

