

Reflection by Mrs Margery Jackman
Anniversary of the death of Catherine McAuley
Our Lady of Fatima Church, Caringbah
November 11, 2008

May I begin by thanking Father Kerry and Sister Bernadette for inviting me to reflect on the readings tonight. As some of you know, I am an Associate of the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy and principal of Catherine McAuley Westmead, a Mercy girls' secondary school in Western Sydney and I very much appreciate the opportunity to share this wonderful celebration of Mercy with you all. I feel I have a link with the Wilcannia-Forbes Congregation and with you all, because we have a much loved statue of Catherine in our front foyer at school, a gift from the sisters at Wilcannia-Forbes and there is many a night when I go past that statue after a trying day at school, and have a little chat with Catherine as I seek to live out her vision in my work with over 1000 adolescent young women in Western Sydney.

Tonight we celebrate three great women of faith: the symbolic Wisdom Woman of the first reading, the audacious foreign woman of Mark's Gospel and a middle aged Irish woman of nineteenth-century Dublin, whose determination to serve God in the poor, revolutionised the Church's understanding of religious orders and transformed the lives of countless women, children and men across the world.

What do these three women from such different backgrounds have in common and what do they say to us, the followers of Catherine McAuley, gathered here in Caringbah tonight, 167 years after her death, on November 11, 1841.

Our first reading, from the book of Proverbs, is a part of what is known as wisdom literature in the Hebrew Scriptures. Compiled by unknown authors approximately 600 years before the birth of Jesus, this book is part of a collection of writings which is heavily influenced by the religious writings of the non-Jewish communities which surrounded the Jewish people at that time. In contrast to the very male centred imagery of God usually found in the Hebrew Scriptures, this book portrays the Divine in feminine terms, in the personification of Wisdom, a feminine noun in Hebrew, Sophia in Greek. To retain this feminine overtone in English, scholars often speak of her as Woman Wisdom. The book of Proverbs tells us that she emanates from God, that she was with God before creation and that she is the presence of God in the world. She is "with God and yet at home in the world" (McCreesh,1968), the voice of God for humanity. Little wonder that the early Christians saw her as the precursor of Jesus, the incarnate presence of God amongst us.

Our passage tonight is the final chapter of the book of Proverbs and it is an acrostic poem. Each line begins with a successive letter from the Hebrew alphabet. If it had been written in English the first line would start with A, the second with B and so on. What is immediately obvious is that this is a symbolic picture of Woman Wisdom, not a real person. So what is she like, this symbolic Woman Wisdom?

She is a strong woman of both faith and action. She is courageous, confident and far sighted. She attends to her family as a good Jewish woman should, but she pushes the boundaries of what it means to be a woman, the voice of God, in the world. She invests in real estate, she embarks on risky undertakings, she is generous and courageous on behalf of the poor. The poet tells that "she is known for her dignity and strength and she laughs at the days to come" (v. 25)

As I read those words, I can't help but smile because what the author could not possibly have suspected in the sixth century BCE, is that they would sum up so accurately, the life and characteristics of Catherine McAuley, that woman of faith who risked all her inheritance to build her House of Mercy on Baggott Street, that woman of courage who challenged the notion that women should be enclosed in the service of God, that "Sister of Divine Providence" whose unswerving trust in God led her to make 12 foundations in her short 10 years as a Sister of Mercy, that woman of action who declared that "the poor need help now, not next week".

Both the Wisdom Woman of Proverbs and Catherine herself, challenge our concept of who God is and what God is calling us to be and to do, in our world.

The second woman we meet tonight is the Syrophenician woman of Mark's Gospel. She is unnamed, as are most women in scripture, a triple outsider – a woman, a foreigner and an unbeliever. On all three grounds, she is excluded from having anything to do with Jews. She is considered unclean, a dog, in Jewish eyes. Contact with her would make a Jew unclean and require that person to take a ritual bath before they associated with their community again. Yet she deliberately accosts this young Jewish Rabbi who is trying desperately to get some time to himself, in a private house in her neighbourhood. She invades his presence, she refuses to be sent away, she embarrasses both Jesus and his friends with her inappropriate behaviour. If you want to get a sense of how shocked they would have been, imagine a poor Islamic woman bursting through the rows of cardinals and bishops at the recent WYD papal mass and throwing herself at the feet of Benedict XIV, begging for a favour.

But that is what our woman does: she invades Jesus' privacy, bows before him and begs him to heal her daughter, and Jesus, tired, shocked and confronted, takes refuge in the conventions of his age. He repeats the prejudiced response of his time, not that he cannot heal her daughter but that it would not be fair to do so because he is already overwhelmed by the task of meeting the needs of his own people, who must have priority over hers.

We should not be shocked at his response. We have made it ourselves many times when we have been so busy or so exhausted that we cannot respond to one more request for help. We need to remind ourselves constantly that Jesus was fully human, he got tired just as we do, he made mistakes just as we do, he got things wrong from time to time just as we do. His divinity consisted in his never committing sin, never deliberately setting out to hurt someone, not in his being limited by the restrictions of his time.

We would expect that this desperate woman, whom Jesus refers to disparagingly as a "dog", would just slink away, humiliated and beaten but no, she responds with dignity, calling him "sir". She turns his words around and sends them straight back to him: "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs", she responds.

It is a decisive moment in Jesus' career, a moment in which a triple outsider, a woman, a foreigner and a gentile, interacts with Jesus, the famous teaching Rabbi, and the teacher becomes the student. This determined, courageous woman teaches Jesus that his mission is to all, that God's mercy takes no account of religion, race or gender, and having learned the lesson, he responds that it is because of her words that her daughter has been healed. God has spoken in her words and Jesus has been challenged to see anew the inclusive Mercy of God. Mark then goes on to tell us that Jesus then deliberately traveled further into non Jewish territory, fulfilling the words of the prophets, causing the blind to see and the mute to speak. It is a story of liberation not only for the daughter of our woman but for Jesus himself who was freed from the limitations and prejudices of his age.

It is a wonderful story and if we ever needed evidence that the spirit of God was at work in the writing of the Gospels and the selection of the books of the bible, here it is, because the wonder is that this story was allowed to remain in the text, that an outraged editor some where in the long history of compiling the New Testament, didn't remove this story, in the mistaken belief that the divinity of Jesus was threatened by this account of his humanity.

It is also the story of Catherine McAuley. The story of a woman who refused to accept that women must be enclosed behind convent walls if they were to dedicate their lives to God. A woman who refused to accept that nothing could be done to protect poor women and children from exploitation and abuse by their wealthy employers, a woman who deliberately built her house of Mercy in the wealthy section of Dublin so that the rich would be confronted by the poor and inspired to respond to their plight. It is the story of a woman who refused to accept that catholic could not minister in the protestant controlled hospitals of Dublin or that catholic children should be prevented from attending Catholic schools by the government regulations of the day. It is her story and the story of countless unnamed women down the ages who have

had the courage to stand up and be counted on behalf of the poor, the marginalised and the powerless.

So what do these three great women of faith tell us today?

I think they tell us three things

First of all, we are to be people of faith, faith in God's unconditional love for each person, regardless of race, religion or nationality: faith in God's love for the executed Bali bombers, faith in God's love for the drug addict, the refugee, the unemployed, faith that God calls us to recognise Jesus in the face of the poor, the powerless and the unlovely.

Secondly, we are to be people of courage. Like the Wisdom Woman, the Syrophenician woman and Catherine herself, we are to speak out for justice, especially for those least able to speak for themselves.

"Speak as your mind directs and always act with courage", Catherine told her sisters. We cannot hide behind the conventions of our age, whether they be in the state or the Church. We are called to challenge injustice where ever we encounter it, to do so with respect but with courage and determination.

Thirdly, we are to be people of action: people who not only say but do. People who put ourselves forward for committees which challenge injustice, people who join those who act for reconciliation, inclusion and equal opportunity for all. In our parishes, our places of work, amongst our friends and in our families, we are to be people who challenge exclusion and the abuse of power, wherever we encounter it. We may not be able to do everything but each of us can do something, and we have responsibility as people of Mercy, to do that something, no matter how small or how difficult it seems.

At times, action for justice will create tensions for us as women in the Church. At times, we may feel that no good can come of insisting on inclusive language, equal representation in decision making or recognition that God is fully imaged in women as well as in men.

I believe it is here that our three great women of faith can guide us. All three women recognised and challenged the oppression of women in the religious institutions of their time but all three women did it with a sense of respect, love and good humour. Female religious orders, especially the Sisters of Mercy, have pioneered the way for women in the Church: our debt to them is immense and the future calls us to join them, lay and religious, working together in the cause of justice. May the two women of scripture, whose stories we have shared tonight, and the spirit of Catherine McAuley herself, continue to bless, inspire and guide each one of us as we seek to walk in the path of Mercy and Justice, in our age and for our time.