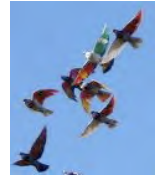

What homing pigeons can teach us

Sr Marie Ralph, Chaplain, Sacred Heart Middle School



Once, on Brighton Beach (Adelaide), 512 kms from Broken Hill, a man took a crate of homing pigeons from the boot of his car. Then he opened the crate and released the pigeons. They flew straight up into the air.

However, instead of heading directly for Broken Hill, which was their home, they proceeded to fly in circles above the beach. Round and round they went. What they were doing seemed silly and a waste of time. But their owner explained that, what the pigeons were doing, was finding their bearings. Once they had found their bearings, they would set off for home.

This homing instinct which many birds possess is almost a miraculous thing. With some it seems to be an inbuilt thing. But others, such as pigeons, have to be trained. The basic requirement of training is to keep them in good health so that they are capable of sustained flight. Fog, snow, rain and adverse winds are sometimes the obstacles they have to overcome.

We too have a homing instinct. God, who has made us for heaven, has put a homing instinct in us. This is a very subtle and fragile thing, since God will never take away our freedom.

Just as the homing instinct doesn't save the birds from the necessity of having to struggle against the wind and the rain, so faith doesn't shield us from the hard knocks of life and death. But what faith does is give us bearings. It enables us to live in a topsy-turvy world without getting lost or giving in to despair. It assures us that we have a home to go to, and points us in that direction.

Through *Isaiah 43: 1-5* God tells us that we will have struggles to contend with. But God reassures us that the struggles will not overwhelm us:

*When you pass through deep water,
I will be with you;
Your troubles will not overwhelm you.
When you pass through fire,
You will not be burnt;*

*The hard trials that come will not hurt you
You are precious to me.
I love you.
Be not afraid - I am with you.*

The birds have to struggle against rain and adverse winds - but they have an inner miraculous bearing, a homing instinct.

We have to struggle against the hard knocks of life - but we have an inner miraculous bearing, our faith in God who says:

*Be not afraid, I go before you always.
Come, follow me and I will give you rest.*

At the Last Supper, when Jesus told the apostles that he was leaving them, they were deeply distressed. But he consoled them with these words:

*There are many rooms in my Father's house.
I am going to prepare a home for you.
I shall return to take you with me;
So that where I am you may be too.*

These words assure us that we have an eternal home to go to; a home where all our hopes will be fulfilled.

But there remains the question of how to get there. Have you ever been in a strange city and asked for directions? Sometimes the instructions are so complicated that you can't take them all in. But you may be fortunate enough to meet an exceptionally kind person who says: "Look, it's a bit difficult to explain. Hop in the car and follow me and I'll show you the way."

The way to God has confused and baffled many. Some have got hopelessly confused; others have got lost. When Jesus said: "So where I am you may be too," Thomas exclaimed: "Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus didn't give him a lot of complicated directions. Rather, he said "I am the Way."



The Birth of Hope

Br Mark O'Connor fms

'Because it is Christmas, because the Word was made flesh, God is near, and the faintest word in the quiet chamber of our heart, the word of love, reaches his ear and heart.'

Karl Rahner SJ

Christmas is a special time of year for most of us. There is a richness of life and colour. Hope is in the air. God is near.

We hear sacred and joyful music. Even the most health-conscious among us tend to forego self-discipline for family and work celebrations. And, of course, there are the joys of family and friends, of giving and receiving, community and friendship that are more poignant now than at any other time.

But, while many experience these delights, others are overwhelmed by a deep loneliness and sadness at this time of year. Why? Perhaps because, while being reminded of the fullness of life and family, they instead find exposed empty spaces .

And, so many families fight during the holidays, trying to meet a grotesque standard for the perfect gift, meal or gathering. None of us is perfect, and Christmas often brings us uncomfortably close to that reality.

Christmas time is hard for many because we can struggle to negotiate this nearness of the bitter with the sweet, with all that we lack standing so close to this celebration of life and relationship. Yet such feelings are also an invitation to enter more deeply into the Gracious Mystery, for the

emptiness we all feel at times can also be a gateway for celebrating its richness.

Christmas celebrates the kairós moment, when Jesus Christ, in all his glory and innocence, becomes one of us and comes as close as you can get to our 'messy' humanity. His birth was itself a cause of controversy, for Jesus was purposely conceived amidst the sexual scandal of 'illegitimacy'. "We were not born of prostitution" was the taunt of Jesus' enemies as narrated in John's gospel. Even the 'family tree' of Jesus as recounted in the genealogy of Matthew shows that there were quite a few 'black sheep' in his chosen relatives – saints and sinners abound in the family of the Son of David!

The first news of his birth was given to shepherds, among the lowest social outcasts in that culture. He was born in the most impoverished conditions—without anaesthetic, without medical assistance and amidst animal waste.

Our God - Emmanuel - didn't come into the world to commemorate a celebration that has no place for our emptiness and fragility. If anyone has cause to celebrate the season, it is precisely the person who feels that something is missing.

The Incarnation and Christmas therefore are a consoling reminder that God is now finally with us in our brokenness and longing - our secret, selfish desires, our depression, our family fights, our overeating, our obsession with giving gifts, our grief over loved-ones lost, our aching desire for healing in broken relationships, our desire to

reconcile with that family member after so many years. God is with us in all of this and can identify with our pain and loss.

Ultimately, Christ's coming was meant to satisfy our yearning to know that we can come to God as we are, especially in all our loneliness and brokenness - that this little, tiny, helpless child - Jesus of Nazareth - has come to let us hold him in our frail arms. As Francis Webb says: The tiny, not the immense, Will teach our groping eyes.

Christmas is for all of us. Yes, for those who already know this joy, but especially for those who don't. Let our prayer be that of Karl Rahner SJ

'We must be quiet and not fear the night, else we will hear nothing. For the ultimate message is uttered only in the night's stillness ever since, through the gracious arrival of the Word into the night of our life, Christmas's silent night, holy night came down among us.'

Five Days Old

Francis Webb

*Christmas is in the air.
You are given into my hands
Out of quietest, loneliest lands.
My trembling is all my prayer.
To blown straw was given
All the fullness of Heaven.*

*The tiny, not the immense,
Will teach our groping eyes.
So the absorbed skies
Bleed stars of innocence.
So cloud-voice in war and trouble
Is at last Christ in the stable.*

*Now wonderingly engrossed
In your fearless delicacies,
I am launched upon sacred seas,
Humbly and utterly lost
In the mystery of creation,
Bells, bells of ocean.*

*Too pure for my tongue to praise,
That sober, exquisite yawn
Or the gradual, generous dawn
At an eyelid, maker of days:
To shrive my thought for perfection
I must breathe old tempests of
action*

*For the snowflake and face of love.
Windfall and word of truth.
Honour close to death.
O eternal truthfulness, Dove,
Tell me what I hold—
Myrrh? Frankincense? Gold?*

*If this is man, then the danger
And fear are as lights of the inn,
Faint and remote as sin
Out here in the manger.
In the sleeping, weeping weather
We shall all kneel down together.*



Mary MacKillop - “the other Mary”

Bishop Mark Coleridge

At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, we meet two women – Mary Magdalene and another more mysterious figure known simply as “the other Mary”.

Coming to the tomb, the two Marys meet an angel who says to them, “Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.

Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead”. The women then run from the tomb with an equal measure of awe and joy “to tell his disciples”. But then we read, “Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings’.” They “came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him”.

This extraordinary story can be read as the story of Mary MacKillop, “the other Mary”, who is before all else a witness to Easter, a woman who saw and heard the Risen Lord, a woman who received a commission from him and who was faithful to that commission to the end.

Many are prepared to tolerate Mary MacKillop as a do-gooder who stood with the battlers and worked for the poor. That, it seems, is religion with an acceptable face in a culture like our own which tends to be uncomfortable with the more mysterious and less pragmatic depths of religious experience.



Mary was certainly a do-gooder, but she was very much more; and the “more” is the secret to understanding why she is a saint. The “more” leads us to Easter and to Mary as a witness to the hope that only Easter confers.

Believing that she had received a commission from the Risen Christ, Mary MacKillop set out to do things which many regarded as impossible.

Here there are deep echoes of the Bible where we meet a God whose speciality is doing the

impossible – light from darkness in the beginning, babies from barren wombs, slaves from Egypt and, climactically, a dead man from the tomb.

As a woman who did what looked impossible, Mary opened up a new vision of possibility in a world where the vision of human possibility always tends to be shrinking. That is why she stands for ever as a witness to hope.

The Bible rubs our nose in the seeming hopelessness of things, but only to say that if we go to the heart of all that seems hopeless and meet God there – just as the Marys met Jesus at the tomb – then we find the true hope that nothing and no-one can take away.

Mary opened schools for the poor and taught the children many things to equip them for life. But what she and her Sisters taught above all was the way of hope, the way of Easter. She led the children to meet the Risen Christ, just as she herself had seen and heard him.

That was the best and most powerful thing she could do to equip the young for a life that is genuinely human, a life that is fully lived as God wants, not the half-life of the human being locked in world without hope where Christ

never rises from the dead.

Mary MacKillop went early one morning, on the first day of the week, to the tomb, looking for the One who had been crucified. That's why she was called Mary of the Cross: she was always looking for the One who was crucified.

In searching for him, Mary found the One who is risen from the dead. Having seen him and heard him on that morning, she could see him and hear him everywhere, but most especially in those places where others could see and hear nothing, even at the heart of the Church.

Mary MacKillop stands not as an admirable do-gooder or a proto-feminist in some ideological sense, but as a holy and deeply human witness to the Resurrection, as a seed of infinite hope in this dry continent.

St Mary of the Cross will stand for ever with St Mary Magdalene in the morning light, coming to Jesus who had first come to them, taking hold of his feet, worshipping him, and teaching others, especially the little ones, to do the same.

That's what the Successor of Peter will proclaim on the morning of her canonisation.



Secretariat on the Laity

Animation Plan of the Secretariat for the Next Three Years



A meeting of the Secretariat on the Laity took place during the week of September 13-18, 2010 in order to plan out the animation of Marist Laity for the next three years.

Participants at the meeting were Javier Espinosa, the new Director of the Secretariat, the two new co-directors Ana Sarrate and Tony Clark, the new liaison of the General Council, Antonio Ramalho, all recently nominated for this service, and Linda Corbeil and Brother Afonso Murad, who were already acting as members of the enlarged Secretariat.

The objective of the meeting was to come up with the Animation Plan of the Secretariat for the next three years. It would be a kind of road map or pathway.

After a week of intense work, the central reference point that will steer the Secretariat has been defined, in the Plan of animation. This road map is inspired by the fundamental call of the 21st General Chapter. For the Secretariat the call includes the challenge to contribute to the birth of a new epoch for the Marist charism; to bring to life and

to solidify a new relationship between the Brothers and the laity, to visualize the Marist future as a communion of people in the charism of Champagnat.

This Plan conceived by the Secretariat is a first draft to be discussed and enriched with the echoes of laity and brothers in the following months before being presented to the General Council in its session during the month of January 2011 for its approval.

We are now able to single out some highlights of the Plan: A firm support and development of the Marist lay vocation; the priority for the formation process; to utilize and benefit from the role of the laity and the growth in communion (unity); to work in conjunction with the Plan of the General Council and of other Secretariats, especially with “The Brothers Today”; to define the functions and responsibilities of the co-directors; to better unify the laity in different regions; to broaden the Secretariat with a representative from each region of the Institute; to propose the revision of the Project for life of the Champagnat Movement.

The meeting in Rome was done in an atmosphere of intense work, and in great fraternity and communion (unity). The support and work of Brother Afonso Murad which he gave during his time in the Secretariat are greatly appreciated and acknowledged. We remember with gratitude Brother Pau for all his initiatives and work these past years.

During this time the Secretariat was in contact with Brother Charles Kitson, who is responsible to the Association of Christian and Montserrat Schools, co-secretary, as well as with the community of San Egidio, with the aim of maintaining dialogue with the lay movements of other institutions or groups.



Christians in Algeria – witnessing in difficult times

September - October 2010

In Algeria it is estimated there are only 10,000 Protestants and up to 5,000 Catholics – in a total population of 38 million, mostly Muslims. Although religious freedom is officially proclaimed in Algeria, in practice it does not exist. Since 2006 there has been a law that punishes any form of evangelisation.

Catholic Archbishop Ghaleb Bader of Algiers has not allowed himself to be intimidated, however, and has constantly renewed his demands for Christians to be granted the right to the free exercise of their religion.

Although they are a tiny minority, the Catholics fulfil an important function, according to Archbishop Ghaleb Bader. “They witness to Christ, and thus to the continuing existence of his Church. Our friendship, our service prompts our Muslim countrymen to ask themselves, why do the Christians do this? Why do they live among us, although they are in danger?”

[Let us keep in mind the great ministry exercised by Br Michael Sexton in Algeria - the Hermitage Province]