

Sacred Heart Mission Easter Celebration 2022
'GROWING IN HOPE'
Celebrating 40 years of Mission

We gather today in joyous celebration. For us individually the journey through the pandemic has been just that, a journey. I am sure we are all in agreement of the continuous flow of ups and downs. Gathering here today we have warmly embraced each other as we enter then walked down memory lane of the mission with the images accompanying the instrumental music. Cathy has reminded us of the land of the ancestors on which we stand. A reminder of all who have walked before us and all who will walk after us.

Lisa:

In preparing for this celebration today, a small team of us gathered thinking of a few questions to guide us. In recognition of the 40 years what from our past should we carry with us into the future and what is our hope for the future. Let us tell you a story as we break open our reflection.

KAREN

The seed slowly emerged from the dark, eager to reach the sunbeams as they relentlessly pounded on the soil. Witnessing around her the forms and shapes that developed a rhythm which offered a sense of harmony to all. Maturity came upon her and one day she realised it with her branches outstretched and leaves glimmering in their earthy sunburnt tones. Weeks passed and the tree became a part of life in the meadow. She caught the kites of children who gathered nearby, and happily tossed them back again.

"You are a good sport," they said to her. "We will call you Friend."

A young couple sat in the shade of her thickening leaves and spoke of their love for one another. "This is a special place," they said, and they left their initials on her toughened bark.

"We shall call you Keeper of Secrets," they said to her. A tired woman, bent with care, walked silently through the meadow, oblivious to everything except her own worries. She did not notice the tree. "Come and rest for a while," whispered the tree, but she finally had to toss a piece of fruit onto the path before the woman saw her. Wearily, the woman sat and ate the fruit, and pondered deeply. The tree could feel the woman relax as she rested against her trunk.

Finally, the woman stood up. "Thank you," she said and embraced the tree. The tree winced, for the woman had touched a spot that had not healed from the winter's ravages -- a spot that remained vulnerable even though the previous spring and summer months had been good to her. The woman seemed to notice and caressed the spot thoughtfully. At that moment there was a oneness -- a sense of understanding between the troubled woman and the tree.

"I will call you Hope," whispered the woman, and touched her again with affection and gratitude.

Long after her fruit had been shared and she began noticing touches of scarlet in her leaves, the tree still carried deep within her the memories of all her experiences.

LISA

The story begins with the people and is for the people. A series of events aligned with the new parish priest Father Ernie Smith arriving into St Kilda on 23 January 1982. No different from any one else having preconceived ideas about the area. The following day from moving in Ernie celebrated his birthday later to recall that St Kilda was a terrific birthday present! In a time when St Kilda was experiencing an above average concentration of isolated individuals, with societal shift resulted in large social exclusion and recreational activities having profound impact on the quality of life. The people spoke!

Listening to those who sat where you sit today, to the voices outside the comfort of these four walls it was decided, "Let's just open the door and see what happens."

Just like the tree, the open house approach was the starting point of the mission; a sign of welcome and hospitality. The two-storey presbytery contained seven rooms and the first parish newsletter had a cartoon stating "House full". The invitation for something new was already underway with Kate Wilson arriving to work as the first social worker, carpenter Jim Finlayson, Fr. Denis Sheehan moving in as chaplain. Together living into "we can do no great things only small ones with love"

In 1992 the open house approach shifted into a larger activity centre with the hall opening to give greater opportunity to care for people and volunteers continued. While the Mission broadened, the spirit of hospitality developed in the earlier days remains.

Karen

The days started to close in with the night stretching longer than day. The clouds crept in with rain drops pounding down. Unable to soak up the water, slowly it rose, cold set in, shivering as slowly branches became brittle and fear of breaking set in.

The once familiar feeling of foot prints racing up my trunk were replaced with raindrops like tears in the lonely meadow. My voice bounces off those around me, as my roots became paralysed in the earth and my bark cracked open and... I am lonely, afraid, where have you gone.

Snow droplets start to fall, with the brightness reflecting up as well as shining down. The glare too strong or is the light too bright, I can see more than I want to see. The chills of the ice and bitter cold start to tighten my bark, I can feel it. The stiffness starts to form as an automatic protection from the cold.

As the grey skies still, the stars peek through touching into the core, that small deep place within, that remains unfrozen, open to mystery, that you have made your dwelling. Touching to hear the reminder that long before I can feel warmth surrounding me, I am being freed and formed from within in ways so deep and profound that I could not possibly know what is happening.

Slowly, my roots shrink as the sound of my branches breaking with the weight of ice forming rolling over the meadow. Gently lean into the darkness of the night as the days pass by unknowing when it will end. The only glimmer of light from the moon that is forever shadowing the dark.

LISA

Like any story that features an open house approach the memories are abundant of 'winter' moments. In 1986 the term "Mission House" was coined and the stories, events which followed include highs and lows, times of growth and success with times of apparent failure. The first attempt at managing a rooming house got away to a fiery start! A cheap rental was acquired, improved and opened with a celebration BBQ. After just seven months, there

came an early morning phone call. The house was on fire. While the physical building was gone, the sense of 'belonging' that existed was evident.

Moments of heaviness arrived with an awareness of people dying alone calling for another aspect of care. Over the years the fact that members of the community were passing away led to us embracing the continuing care we show with the person's life being fully completed with the celebration of life.

The one thing that has remained through all the stories are the people! In St Kilda, parishioners were the first 'workers'. They helped to prepare meals, do the shopping and care for the house. The same spirit of people getting involved continues, not only with the meal program and open house, but in the wellness centre, the women's ministry, Op shops and Mass for aged care. When invitations are given, a response is always followed and stories are formed.

Karen

The tree awakened earlier than usual one morning and stretched her arms toward the horizon as if to invite the early rays of dawn into her world. She shivered with delight, wiggling her roots in the muddy earth, which had only recently yielded its frozen hardness.

She sensed something was different. Her roots seemed to be extending further and more firmly into the soil. Her arms seemed to embrace more of the world, not with the timid gestures of a sapling afraid of tangling with the wind, but with the freedom of knowing that the wind could not topple her.

"I have survived the winter!" she marvelled aloud.

"How wonderful," whispered the dawn, who had a facility for appreciating new miracles no matter how often they occurred. She swirled around the tree in a ritual of blessing, enveloping her gently, making her feel very special.

"How very different this feels," mused the tree, for a few short weeks ago the melting earth beneath her roots had sent shivers of panic through every single branch. She had cried out in alarm then, sensing that she might sink into the earth and lose herself. Often during the cold winter...., while she had trembled with anxiety she had felt an inner voice -- a small but steady voice -- which remained fluid and alive when everything else in her seemed paralysed.

But now -- now! -- she was filled with the realization that her inner life was in harmony with the world outside. She relaxed the tight fibres of her being which she had unwittingly held rigid during the cold grey months.

LISA

The sunshine in the mission story is never far away! Even during the past few years the creative outreach during the pandemic is a reminder that no matter how long the winter, spring is sure to follow. When the mission gates open each day familiar voices come through in greetings and thanksgiving. Unfamiliar faces are greeted in the spirit of welcome and hospitality.

Programs have grown to meet new needs, at the heart of everything is recognition that everybody is unique. No matter where people are in their journey, we are here to support them and do not give up. Everyone is welcome at the table. While the meal program is one ray of sunshine that the mission holds, there is a wide range of homelessness services, research and innovation to advocate for an inclusive, fair and compassionate community. The stories of these new personal strengths, achievements and hope of the people pave the path, seep into the walls and are held in the heart of the community.

Days passed, and the energy within her fairly exploded, spilling out into dusters of lovely blossoms. She watched each day as they grew larger and more beautiful. A blush of pink coursed through her petals. The tree stood speechless.

You have survived the winter because you are, and were, and always will be very much loved," said the sun. "For that small place deep within you that remained unfrozen and open to mystery, that is where I have made my dwelling. And long, long before you felt my warmth surrounding you, you were being freed and formed from within in ways so deep and profound that you could not possibly know what was happening."
"I...I...I had hope," she whispered, noticing that the words seemed to come from that inner space deep within her.

"Yes, you had hope," sparkled the sun. You trusted in life and that is what enabled you to grow. For if you had no hope and trust in the centre of your being, you could not have blossomed into you."

This was almost too much joy for the tree to hear. No words would come, and no words were necessary.

LISA

Into the future we will always be aware of our roots and how we came into being. Father Ernie arriving in St Kilda and noticing the local community who were doing it truly tough. By opening the parish house in support of the St Kilda parish and welcoming all for somewhere to eat and somewhere to sleep. Knowing that without these vital supports, of a nutritious meal and somewhere safe to sleep, nothing else could be successfully and sustainably addressed in the lives of vulnerable people.

Karen

As one of our team worker's from women's house and pathway support worker shares – 'This is still the core of the mission today.' People come for meals and help to find accommodation. From this point they are encouraged to engage more broadly and more deeply to address the things that are important for them and which will help them regain dignity and self-efficacy in their lives. We need to be strong and passionate advocates to people in power in raising both funds and in some ways, more importantly raising consciousness that every life has dignity, and all Australians are deserving of an income above the poverty line, nutritious food and a safe and secure place to stay.

Lisa

Let us now take a moment to think of our hopes for the future. We have acknowledged the roots, those who have formed the mission, building the trunk from which our branches bend outwards. Let us turn to our neighbour, express what hope you have for the future, for your own future, the future of the mission, the future of society, Hope!
We invite you to capture these hopes in a few words on the leaves you received as you came in. There are a few extras if anyone needs one.

Karen

We invite you now to come forward to our tree and present your leaf! As you come forward if you wish to speak of your hope to all, please just take the microphone from Lisa or myself. Together let us share our hopes as we dream of the branches on our symbolic tree going forward.