

## 2019 3<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER

On Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> June there will be a mighty parade through the Streets of Gisborne. It will commemorate the centenary of the return of soldiers of the Maori Pioneer Battalion to our area on 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1919. On that day thousands of people lined our streets with flags, streamers and emblems to welcome our local troops of the Maori Battalion as they disembarked at Gisborne wharf from the sloop Tuatea. As the men marched from the wharf to the railway station, the streets were packed. They then made a short train journey to the Racecourse where a huge civic welcome was accorded to them.

The central feature of our parade this year will be a 100-man honour guard dressed in First World War uniforms... one soldier for every year since our men returned.

Tragically, twenty years later the Maori Battalion would have to reassemble again to fight- ever-so valiantly- in Northern Africa and Italy.

I recently listened on National Radio to a recording made in 1942 of a group of men from the Maori Battalion who were all wounded and receiving treatment in the New Zealand General Hospital in Northern Africa. They were singing 'Silent Night' in memory of their fallen comrades. The song was expressive, too, of their longing to be home again with their loved ones in far distant New Zealand. The gentleness of the singing; the beauty of the harmonies; the poignancy of feeling. It was deeply moving.

Those men had witnessed horrors men should never have had to see. Yet there was no thought of quitting; no despairing of ultimate victory. They would finish what had to be finished. Anything less would have been a betrayal of their comrades buried in the fields of France during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War and in latter days in the sands of North Africa.

These men were fearsome warriors on the field of battle. Yet in their singing it was clear that they were men of great sensitivity; staunch men; good men; mature men. They were no longer boys seeking glory and fame but men bravely putting their lives at risk to protect their loved ones from living under the heel of Fascism.

This same dynamic is within today's Gospel.

Before the trauma of Our Lord's Passion, Peter had been filled with bravado; cock-a- sure; brazenly self-confident. Yes - he trumpeted- he would most certainly die before allowing the Master to be captured.

But that night in the Garden, Peter lost courage and ran away. Not long after, he denied even knowing Jesus-to a servant girl. On the following day as His crucified Master hung on the Cross, he didn't even show his face.

In the days that followed Peter wept with shame. Yet- to his eternal credit- he did not hang himself as did Judas and he did not run home. He stayed with his friends in Jerusalem.

Three weeks later, by Lake Galilee, the Risen Jesus looked deeply into the soul of Peter and asked him three times: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And Jesus knew that he was looking into the eyes of a profoundly changed man: a humbled man but also, in a strange way, an ennobled man. Jesus knew that Peter would never again fall short in courage.

The hakas done by the Maori Battalion as they left New Zealand would have had a lot of show-acting in them, But the carols they sang in the field hospital in North Africa came from their souls. They were ever-so real.

Peter, too was no longer show-acting. His quiet: "Lord, you know everything- you know I love you" was a lament, expressing his profound sorrow for his past cowardice.

Our first Reading underlines the change made in Peter through his suffering. Peter eye-balled Annas, the all-powerful High Priest, who had schemed three months earlier to bring about Jesus' crucifixion and said, "It was you who had Jesus executed by hanging Him on a tree. It was the God of our ancestors who raised Him up. We are witnesses to this. We and the Holy Spirit." This was a new Peter. A Peter on fire with love for His Lord.

On ANZAC Day, we all prayed for those heroic men and women who suffered and died to protect our country from despotism. And we were reminded of our responsibility to build a society which makes all the sacrifices they suffered worthwhile.

In a similar fashion, we, who are Christians, have a responsibility to live in a way worthy of the sacrifice Jesus paid for us on the Cross.

In times of temptation when we want to ditch our Faith as being too hard, Jesus will whisper into our hearts: "Do you love Me?" And we must reply: "Yes, Lord, you know I love You." And, like the soldiers of the Maori Battalion and like Peter, our great Father in the Faith, we will continue fighting the good fight to the end and never give up; knowing that the Lord is alive and is with us.