

2020 16TH SUNDAY

When Fr. John Jolliffe made contact with me last February and offered to give me the opportunity for a holiday, I accepted with gratitude. And then I heard our Prime Minister exhorting holiday-makers to visit a place in New Zealand they had never been to before. Well that pressed plenty of buttons. I have always wanted to visit Jerusalem- Hiruharama- on the Whanganui River- the tiny Village where Mother Aubert laboured for so many years and where she founded the Sisters of Compassion. Everything became possible when Sr Meg organised lovely accommodation for me in nearby Whanganui with her Sisters of St Joseph.

And then the long-planned for day arrived! The drive up to Jerusalem from Whanganui was a delight. The weather was perfect- sunny and warm and the country side- although mighty hilly- was at its very best.

As I approached Jerusalem I saw the spire of the church reaching up to heaven. My heart flipped with delight. As I got out of my car, there wasn't a person to be seen but a friendly dog gave me a welcome and I immediately felt the holiness and the great goodness of the place embracing me. It was here in Jerusalem in 1885 that Mother Aubert and her Sisters accepted care for over 30 babies and raised them with tenderness and love. It was here that Mother Aubert and her Sisters catechised the Maori people of the area and taught the local children in very make-shift schools. It was here that Mother Aubert became an expert in producing healing medicines from local bushes and shrubs; remedies which gave solace to thousands. It was so good to be in that holy place.

A few days later I journeyed to Ngakuru for my annual Retreat at the Tyburn Monastery. While there, I spent some of my time reading a biography of Mother Aubert. As I had just been to Jerusalem, the book came alive for me.

What I learnt from the book was the profound influence Mother Aubert had on the people of Wellington after her years in Jerusalem. She and a small group of her Sisters of Compassion arrived in Wellington in 1900 totally penniless. Yet immediately they set to and founded a soup kitchen right in the heart of the city- a soup kitchen that is still active today 120 years later. The Sisters provided the food for the soup kitchen by walking around the City wheeling little buggies begging for money and food. Soon after, in 1907, Mother Aubert set to and organised the building of a huge complex in Island

Bay called the Home of Compassion to give a home to hundreds of newly-born but unwelcomed babies. The opposition from certain sectors was huge. But so too was the support she enjoyed from thousands of good-hearted people. For those were the days of intense bigotry between Catholics and Protestants. Obedient to our first parable today, Mother Aubert opened her soup kitchen and Home of Compassion to all, regardless of their religious beliefs, race or colour.

In her love and compassion Mother Aubert made the Kingdom of God become a reality both in Jerusalem and in Wellington.

When Mother Aubert finally died in 1926, at the age of 91, she was accorded the largest funeral ever to be held in Wellington. She had accomplished works of breath-taking scope. She had stepped into projects without fear; utterly open to God's Spirit; utterly obedient to what she believed to be the Will of God.

The parable of the mustard seed speaks to me of Mother Aubert. The mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds. Mother Aubert was a tiny woman - barely 5 foot in height. The seed she planted in founding the Sisters of Compassion in isolated Jerusalem grew into a sturdy shrub offering shelter and love to the homeless and starving of Wellington and giving a home for hundreds of babies who were unable to be cared for by their mothers. The Home of Compassion and the Sisters of Compassion were Mother Aubert's legacy to Wellington. They were like shrubs in which the birds of the air could come freely and shelter in their branches.

"The kingdom of heaven is like the yeast a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour till it was leavened all through." Mother Aubert's compassion for the little and helpless ones of our world was the yeast that endeared her to so many and enabled her and her Sisters to be the recipients of extraordinary charity wherever she went.

It gives me great joy to hear how our own St. Vincent de Paul Society is working alongside other local groups in reaching out together to those cruelly afflicted by the hardships brought by the Covid virus in Gisborne and up the East Coast. Their work in quietly giving help and gentle encouragement brings the Kingdom of heaven alive in our midst. Most assuredly seeds are now being planted which will make our area a more loving and Godly place in days to come.

It also gives me joy to hear that Young Vinnies are active and very much alive in both Campion College and St. Mary's School. In the generosity of their gifting to the poor, they are a leaven of goodness in our Schools.

We praise God for the inspiration of Mother Aubert. We praise God for the countless people in New Zealand who like Mother Aubert generously listen to the gentle prompting of the Holy Spirit to be people of compassion. Dear God, help us to be like yeast in our community- uplifting and energizing those who have been flattened by life and in need of compassion.

A little story about Mother Aubert to end:

Mother Aubert entered the Office of a businessman looking for a donation to help her works. The gentleman said: "Welcome Mother, take a chair." "Well thank-you," said Mother Aubert who promptly picked up the nice flash chair he had pointed to and walked home with it!