

ST GREGORY THE GREAT HEYWOOD 150TH ANNIVERSARY

On Sunday, March 6, the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the celebration of the first Mass in St Gregory's Heywood was commemorated.

The sesquicentenary of the opening of St Gregory's Church was acknowledged with an Anniversary Mass. Bishop Paul Bird led the celebration, with Fr Gregory Tait concelebrating (pictured right). Bishop Paul's homily can be read below.

The Mass was followed by a dinner, which was held at the Heywood Hotel, attended by locals and visitors alike. The Parishioners of St Gregory's are to be congratulated on a wonderful celebration.

On March 11, 1866, St Gregory's was opened and dedicated with considerable ceremony. It was a significant event in the life of the growing and strategically located settlement of Heywood. Heywood had been renamed from the Fitzroy River Crossing in 1852, and a township surveyed and laid out. There had been, of course, an inn on this reliable river crossing since 1839 and a settlement of sorts since the early 1840s.

A visitor to Heywood in 1857 recorded that the settlement consisted of 'Two hotels, a fair store and a few huts.' However, he concluded that 'it was not a very enlightened neighbourhood. No schools existed there, and no religious service had ever been held in the township.' This state of affairs was to change a few years later.



By the early 1860s, the need for a Catholic church at Heywood had been determined. Construction was soon underway. At the time, Heywood had a population of some three hundred people. The nearest Catholic Church was All Saints Portland.

The works progressed well and construction was completed in early 1866, at a cost of some £300. The church was a 'small bluestone building in the Gothic Revival style'. It has also been described as 'primitive Gothic' because of its simplicity and functionality. It was rectangular in layout with a small entrance porch on the north side.

This church is one of the earliest Catholic churches constructed in the hinterland of Victoria's South West. It is a structure of considerable social significance to Heywood and its district.

St Gregory's was named after St Gregory the Great, an early pope. Pope Gregory I, commonly known as St Gregory the Great, was Pope from 590 to his death in 604. Gregory is known for his writings, which were more prolific than those of his predecessors. He was also a talented administrator, who successfully expanded the temporal and spiritual authority of the papacy. He proved stronger and more able than the emperors of a declining Rome. He is the patron saint of musicians, singers, students and teachers.

The Church of St Gregory is located on the inland side of the river crossing. This compact, solid structure was to be a comforting and reassuring presence for those making their way into the hinterland with its forests, swamps, dangers and uncertainties.

The 1866 opening was recorded in some detail by the Portland Guardian of the day, 'It is seldom that the town of Heywood exhibits as much life and bustle as manifested yesterday on the opening of the Roman Catholic Church, dedicated to St Gregory the Great.'

Furthermore, the Guardian reported, 'The formal opening was rather imposing, not so much from the numbers in attendance, as from the fact that His Lordship the Right Rev Dr Goold, Bishop of Melbourne, and the Right Rev Doctor Shiel, Bishop elect of Adelaide, with Dean Slattery of Warrnambool, and the Rev P Riordan, Portland, were taking part in the ceremony.'



It was recorded that the Union Jack was displayed on both sides of the entrance door, that there was an impressive procession, that Fr Riordan celebrated the Mass, that Doctor Shiel gave a short sermon and that Bishop Goold concluded the ceremony.



St Gregory's was one of Heywood's earliest buildings. Over time, various changes were made to the church. Noel Learmonth in, 'Four towns and a Survey', notes that on October 28 1872, tenders were called for to enlarge the church. There is some suggestion that it was further extended or modified in 1890. In 1907, it was redecorated. Various other works and improvements have been undertaken over time. However, the building generally retains a high degree of integrity and the original timber pews are still in place.

Over time, St Gregory's has been administered out of Portland, with the parish priest of All Saints Catholic Church serving the needs of the Heywood congregation.

Fr Gregory Tait acknowledges the work of Mr. Bernard Wallace for producing the bulk of the text which has been used here. Part of this text was originally produced for the Heywood Community Newsletter March 2016. Edited and augmented by Fr Tait.

Bishop Paul Bird

Homily on the occasion of 150th Anniversary of St Gregory's, Heywood – March 6, 2016 Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year C

150 years ago, people gathered very much as we are gathered today – to celebrate a special moment in the life of the community of Heywood. On Sunday, 11th March, 1866, people came to this spot to mark the opening of this church of St Gregory the Great.

As we look back on that ceremony, we're stepping back in time. 11th March 1866 was eight days before Mary MacKillop founded the Sisters of St Joseph. It was eight years before the founding of the diocese of Ballarat. The bishop presiding in 1866 was James Alipius Goold, Bishop of Melbourne.

Today we can give thanks for the faith of those who gathered here 150 years ago and all those who have gathered in this church in all the years since.

We acknowledge the people who have come to this church through the generations. We remember those who have been baptised here. We remember those who have been confirmed or made their first communion here. We remember those who have been married here. We remember those who have been buried from here. We remember those who have gathered for Sunday Mass here, as the seasons have come and gone, for a hundred and fifty years.

This Church of St Gregory has been here for all that time. It has stood here through rain and shine, through every season. In its own way, this church is a sign of the perseverance of the Catholic community of this district – their perseverance in faith through all those years.

Throughout the generations, members of this community have gathered in this place. They have gathered in the name of Christ. They have prayed for the gifts they have needed in their daily lives. They have placed their trust in God, the God of mercy and compassion.

This evening, we too gather in the name of Christ. We too pray for the gifts we need in our lives now. We too place our trust in God, the God of mercy and compassion.

In the gospel for this Mass, we heard the story of the man who had two sons. We heard of the younger son squandering his share of the estate. Yet the father still loved him dearly and when the son finally returned, the father ran to meet him and took him in his arms and kissed him tenderly. Jesus told this story to convey something of the tenderness of God, something of the mercy of the heavenly Father.

May this inspire us with great confidence in God. This is the God we believe in, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of tenderness and compassion, rich in mercy and full of kindness to all who call upon him.

Over these past 150 years, the members of the community of Heywood have come here to pray. They have placed their trust in the God of mercy. This evening we're continuing this tradition. We have come here to pray. We can place our cares before our merciful God and pray for the help we need.

As we pray, may the mercy of God flow over us. May the kindness of God bring us comfort in any sorrows we may have. May the compassion of God bring us the great gift of peace of heart.

May the blessing of God be with the community of Heywood and with all who have links with this Church of St Gregory. May God bless us all.

Bishop Paul Bird CSsR