

CLOSURE OF ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH, WATCHEM

After 124 years as a celebrating faith community the time has come to farewell St Joseph's Church, Watchem. St. Joseph's, Watchem was the original parish in the area of Birchip, Donald and Sea Lake. Mass giving thanks to God for all that St Joseph's has brought to the life, faith and commitment of both past and present parishioners will be celebrated by **Bishop Peter Connors**, Bishop of Ballarat, on **Sunday 22nd February 2009 10.30 am** followed by a light lunch and refreshments in either the **Watchem Hall** or the **CFA Shed**. All are welcome to join us in celebrating this most significant milestone in the life of this community.



Sister of Mercy, Agnes Connellan, whose parents were married in the original wooden church building in Feb. 1938 at 8a.m. so they could get to Donald and go away on their honeymoon on the train, and who was brought up to believe that she was the first to be baptised in the new brick church, offers a reflection on the history of St. Joseph's.

HISTORICAL WATCHEM

On Sunday February 22nd there will be a closing Mass of St. Joseph's Church in Watchem. Bishop Peter Connors will be in attendance at this sad but inevitable occasion for Watchem and surrounding districts. An occasion such as this highlights our current Church climate of limited resources and personnel in the area as a sign of an unknown future. However God has ways of doing and being in the changing world of the 21st century and we trust and look forward in faith.

Watchem is the oldest Catholic community in the present parish of Birchip. Its original church pre-dates all other churches in the area. The Watchem parish was the forerunner of the present parish of Birchip and it has a long and proud record of Catholicity. The first recorded visit of a priest to the area took place in September 1874. On that occasion the first Mass in the present parish was said by Fr. Moore of Maryborough in the present parish area at the home of Patrick Donoghue situated on allotment 88 of the Parish of Watchem at the corner of Singletree and Merrett's Roads.

The original weatherboard church was opened on 1st July 1885 by Bishop Moore. A curate from St. Arnaud, Fr. John Barry, seemed to be a significant priest in the beginnings of a large area. To reduce travelling for the priest a Presbytery was built in Watchem. This presbytery served the wants of many priests who had been stationed there of the period from 1892 until the parish centre was removed to Birchip in 1960.

The current Church building had a specific purpose which was related to Fr. John Barry who is buried in the grounds of the Church. The foundation stone was laid on 8th May 1938 by Dr. Foley, the Bishop of Ballarat and reads:

*“A. M. D. G.”
The Catholics of Watchem erected this church
to commemorate the Golden Jubilee in the Priesthood
of their esteemed pastor Rev. John Barry.*

The completed church was blessed and opened by Dr. Foley on 22nd March 1939 in the presence of a very large assembly of clergy, parishioners, civic representatives and friends of Father Barry, both Catholic and non Catholic. It was indeed *“a day to be remembered in the history of Watchem.”* Donor’s names for the church have been placed in a sealed list under stone under tabernacle by Fr. Dan Boylan.

The first wedding to take place in the new church was celebrated on January 17th, 1940 when Leah Belleville married Maxwell John Stebbins. The last nuptial in the old church was Teresa Winifred Connellan and Laurence James Burke on 27th September, 1938. The first baptism was Agnes Mary Connellan, daughter of Jim and Doss Connellan (Belleville) on 25th May 1939. Fr. O’Connell performed the first wedding of Leah and Max while Fr. Jack Connellan officiated at the other two ceremonies which involved members of the Connellan clan.

Such an historical event as this occasion is a timely reminder that:

*Today’s preparation determines tomorrow’s achievements
Choice not chance determines destiny.
Hope sees the invisible, feels the intangible and achieves the impossible.*

Our ancestors with their vision, faith and courage seemingly kept their feet on the ground while keeping them moving. Yet reflecting on these years of the Watchem Parish I am reminded of the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, which reflects the theme of “transition” to another way of being and doing maybe: I quote:

*“There is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under heaven:
A time for giving birth,
A time for dying,
A time for planting,
A time for uprooting what has been planted.” (Ecclesiastes Ch 3:1-2)*

May the sacrifices, faith and generosity of our ancestors who promoted the Catholic faith in the Watchem Parish and district continue enabling us to remember that:

“Between tomorrow’s dreams and yesterday’s regret is today’s opportunity.

As we glance into the future, hopefully we will stop and reflect on “who we are,” “where we have been” and ‘where we are going’, remembering that we are primarily Christian people who are constantly changing, constantly growing, and constantly searching to find ourselves and God.

To find God we need inner eyes of faith. With these inner eyes we recognize God as present in the faces of those around us, in the beauty of the sunset, in the calm loveliness of the night. With our inner ears we will hear God’s voice in the rustle of the leaves, the patter of steady rain, and the gathering of friends. God will always be with us in all our changes.

Agnes Connellan rsm

Note:

Historical records taken from *“The Mustard Seed - Catholic History of Watchem, Birchip, Karyrie, Curyo and Watchupga 1881-1991”* Compiled by George Gould for the Birchip Catholic Centenary in 1991.