

**Opening Mass
St Pius X College**

16 February 2021

Once upon a time there was a great forest.¹ It ranged over hills for miles all the way to the western seas. One day, one of the great standing trees, an oak, was having a conversation with an elegant, tall pine. As they often did, they talked about the other trees, life in the forest, the weather, and all the news that the birds brought with them from the outside. Mostly they spoke of the other trees.

The oak mentioned the lovely, delicate azalea with its pink, soft white and lavender blooms. God certainly knew what he was doing when he made such a creature. Then the pine, said, "And look at that rowan tree. Its shade and branches, its smell, and it is so easily carved and made into other beautiful things. Such a creation." They went through the trees one by one, and then the oak nearly spit out, "And look at that ash tree. I just don't know why God created that tree. And there are so many of them! They seem to sprout up everywhere and endure hardily, but really, they are rather useless. They burn quickly, and the wood is so soft that it can be made into other things. It's such a shame there are so many of them."

Days later a woodsman came through the forest looking for a tree. He needed to make something. His house and workshop were falling to ruin. He spoke finally to the great trees, the oak and the pine, for in those days humans and trees and animals could still talk to one another. He asked their suggestion of which tree to choose. They conferred and quickly said, "Take an ash tree. There are so many of them."

And, so he did. He chopped the nearest ash tree down and went home. There he made an axe handle for his new blade and then returned to the forest and started swinging. One by one the trees were felled. Down they all went: the azaleas, the hardwoods, the rowans, the hickory. Finally, he drew near the oak and the pine, and they realised rather late what was going to happen to them. The oak ruefully spoke his thoughts aloud to the pine and said, "Pine, we made a mistake. We forgot something basic in our quick giving away of the life of the ash tree. We are all trees at root and the death of one means the death of all of us."

And with those words echoing in the air, the woodsman started on the trunk of the great oak with his new axe with its ash handle.

This year you have chosen the theme of "Better Together" as a perspective that will guide you through all your activities as a College. It's a theme that recognises, as the story teaches, that all of us are part of a whole, and that the loss of one part diminishes the entirety. It means that we are called to identify, to recognise and to encourage the uniqueness of each person in the community of our College, for to think that there are those that have no place means that in the end we risk losing the lot. As the story teaches, we risk losing even ourselves.

¹ Taken from Megan McKenna, *Parables: The arrows of God*, (Orbis Books, 1994), 75-76.

Pope Francis is quite clear that, at this time in our history, the future for us lies in doing things together. If the pandemic teaches us anything it is that we cannot go forward alone, isolated. We can only go forward in solidarity with one another. Not one of us has the answer to the future. But together we can consider the way forward and create the future. As he has shared in reflection of the pandemic,

“We need a movement of people who know we need each other, who have a sense of responsibility to others and to the world. We need to proclaim that being kind, having faith, and working for the common good are great life goals that need courage and vigour; while glib superficiality and the mockery of ethics have done us no good. The modern era, which has developed equality and liberty with such determination, now needs to focus on fraternity with the same drive and tenacity to confront the challenges ahead. Fraternity will enable freedom and equality to take its rightful place in the symphony . . . But we have to see clearly, choose well, and act right.”²

This is true for our world in this moment in our history. It is also true for us as a College in this year emerging out of the pandemic.

The implication of this means that we are encouraged to recognise our own part to play and are prepared to offer that part with both trust and generosity. We may not think we have much to offer but every single contribution adds something to the whole. Think of a choir. In a choir not every person sings the same note. If they did, the outcome would be quite monotonous and boring. No, different people in the choir have different notes to sing. At some points in the production, some even fall silent and actually don't sing. But at some stage, at different points, everyone has a part to play. And the result is an extraordinary sound, bigger than any individual contribution.

So, for us. We are caught up in a remarkable choir of people here at the College. We may not sing every note. Nor do we need to. But if we are committed to what the entire choir is seeking to perform, then our individual contribution – even it be just a note or two – will contribute to something altogether remarkable. What matters is whether we believe in the power of the sound of the choir. Then we will willingly play our own note, unique and individual though it may be, yet knowing how it is essential to the whole production. We are sustained and encouraged by what we are seeking to do together.

Every tree makes up the grandeur of the forest, not one more than another. We are in this together. Together, and only together, can we create a better future.

² Pope Francis, *Let us Dream: The path to a better future*, (Simon & Schuster, 2020), 6-7.