

St Joseph's Primary, Balranald, NSW

“G’day”



About two weeks before a tour of Southern New South Wales in May 2003 I received a cancellation from a large school due, apparently, due to some problem with their hall. In desperation I faxed (remember faxes?) a couple of schools in the southwest of NSW to see if anyone was interested in filling the gap. To my relief, Simone Harding from St Joseph’s, Balranald called and said that they’d be keen to have me visit as not many performers would go that far west. St Joseph’s had an enrolment of about 70 children, and to give you a sense of distance it’s about eight or nine hours west of Sydney.

So a few weeks later, after a day in Lake Cargellico we headed out along the Hay Plains and arrived, exhausted, in Balranald at about 9:30 at night. The following morning I turned up at the school at about 8:15.

As I was unpacking the car the first child arrived on his bike, having pedalled from somewhere within the town. He was about eight and had red hair (a good start) and as he saw me, dropped his bike, and with a big smile, said “G’day! Who are you! Can I give you a hand?” Which he did, helping me carry some gear in and asking me questions about guitars and speakers.

There’s plenty of redheads in Balranald and plenty of warm welcomes too. As the kids drifted in during the before school time, I was constantly kept in a stream of conversation.

On reflection I realise that there’s a bit of a dilemma that we face in our schools in terms of children and welcoming. On one hand, we educate our children to be aware and wary of strangers, but on the other hand, the Gospel calls us to be welcoming people, reaching out to others and calling them in to our communities. It’s a fine line.

As mentioned elsewhere, experiences like visiting Balranald have given me a real passion for serving smaller schools. I guess their smallness gives them an advantage in creating a family feel and a community spirit. Their welcomes are second to none and they are open and embracing of new experiences.

My vocation as a wandering minstrel has given me many insights and one of the greatest has been the deepest appreciation for the life of Mary MacKillop. In a time when the distances had to be covered by horse and cart and letters took weeks and months to arrive, her achievement in providing Catholic Education in remote communities in Australia and New Zealand is almost beyond belief.

Partly because of this and also because of the way small schools offered me many of my earlier opportunities to perform, I have a special mission to visit small schools. The journey to Balranald is not an easy one but the people and the welcome are great. I’d gladly travel there again and hope to one day again soon. (*Andrew- have since been back on three more occasions- still a great welcome every time!- 2021*)