

26 January 2014.

In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah speaks of the land of Zebulun and Naphtali as places greatly blessed by the Lord. It is a time of great promise and a time of great joy. We know this reading well; the people that walked in darkness has seen a great light. Their joy has increased just like the joy of harvest time and the yoke of oppression has now been removed. The people are free. God's people have a sense of joy and direction. They feel so blessed that the land under their feet literally rejoices and brings forth a joyful and abundant harvest.

Today we celebrate Australia Day. We give thanks to God for this ancient land. It is a land of freedom, of opportunity, of abundance. It is a land relatively new in terms of European settlement but an ancient land in terms of indigenous culture, traditions and spirituality. It is a land of great climactic extremes – wild tropical storms, fierce bushfires and severe drought. At this very moment, parts of New South Wales and Queensland are suffering the effects of a severe and on-going drought. This is the reality of Australia. But it is a wonderful country with opportunities and challenges and, as a people, we must never take for granted the many blessings we receive, just as the people in today's first reading recognize the God of abundance and blessing.

During the week, I did something I do quite regularly as a priest. I celebrated the funeral of an elderly Italian person. In preparing the funeral, I always meet family members who re-tell a quite familiar story. Their parents left a poor, rural part of Italy just after the Second World War. They travelled by ship to Australia, a journey of 30 days. They came with very little – few possessions, no language, little education and little understanding of the customs, cultures and traditions of this new land. As is the story with many migrants, there was often misunderstanding, cultural insensitivity and lots of communication problems. But they came with hope, with optimism, with goodwill and with determination to settle in this new land. And they became good citizens who contributed to the building up of this great country. This is exactly the same story of my own family history.

In today's second reading, St Paul is calling his listeners to a sense of unity and purpose. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Baptism gives us citizenship as members of God's kingdom and faith presumes a sense of belonging to God's family the Church. But we are also citizens of a country and we are called to live the values of the Gospel in our daily lives. We live in a country of great freedom, relative peace and a stable democracy. Like all healthy democracies, there are many voices and various opinions of how to tackle the great moral and ethical challenges of our time. The greatest challenge is to always seek the common good.

Especially on this Australia Day, we want to give of our best as citizens and as Christians, we hear once again the call to serve and to give. In today's Gospel, we have this familiar scene of Jesus calling the first apostles. They were fishermen and Jesus calls them to leave their nets behind and to follow him. With apparently little training, they were asked to go from catching fish to announcing the good news. Jesus touches something in them that gives them the courage to leave everything behind and to follow him for the sake of the Gospel. They give themselves totally to this new cause.

On the Australia Day long weekend, I always look out for that impressive list of Australia Day honours – not for politicians, sporting greats or media stars – but for the ordinary men and women of our country who in a thousand small ways every day, do something impressive in terms of community service; they give of themselves totally and make our community a much better place. They enrich the lives of others and they do so quietly and humbly never looking out for recognition and reward. How lucky our country is for the commitment of such people. And here, in this celebration of the Eucharist, we hear the call of Jesus to leave everything behind, to follow him and to give our lives for the sake of the Gospel.