

8 December 2013.

It is the great vision of peace, the words of Isaiah in today's first reading. The people of the Old Testament had known decades of war and terror, of suffering, hardship and oppression. But Isaiah holds before them a new vision, a vision so wonderful that known enemies now share friendship and peace; the wolf lives with the lamb, the panther plays with the kid, the calf and lion cub feed together; the lion eats with the ox and the infant plays with the viper. A bit unreal? Imagine going down the road to the Melbourne zoo and putting together animals that are currently separated by cages and fences. There would be carnage and blood-shed. But for Isaiah, the power of God is so great, the vision of the kingdom is so real that peace now reigns where blood-shed, war and disaster was present. It's a bit like Martin Luther King's vision in his "I Have a Dream" speech ... the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners would sit down together at the table of fellowship. He dreamed of the day when his little children would be judged not by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. Unlikely yes, but much of this vision did come true. As it did for Nelson Mandela who is being mourned around the world for helping to end apartheid and bringing peace and democracy to his country. The vision becomes reality.

This reading alerts us to the mystery and reality of what we celebrate at Christmas. Jesus is called the Prince of Peace, he comes to bring God's peace not just to parts of the world where there is conflict and war, but he also comes to bring peace deep into our own hearts when we are troubled, or afraid, or suffering in some way. He comes to bring this peace when we face mighty hurdles in life or are challenged in some way. The child born in the manger comes to bring a peace the world cannot give and Advent is the season of anticipating this gift, Advent is the season of waiting in joyful expectation for the birth of Jesus, Son of God and Son of Mary.

Before the birth of Jesus, there is one called to herald his coming and to prepare the way – John the Baptist. John's task is to call the people's attention to the birth of the Saviour. Advent is our season of preparing for the Saviour's coming, of heeding the call of John the Baptist, in fact, of *being* John the Baptist to those around us today. His message of

repentance sounds a little harsh to modern ears but John's task is to help us clear the way, to get rid of the clutter in life that prevents us from being attentive to the word of God. In the rush and scramble to get to Christmas, we are called to open up a space in our hearts and reflect deeply on the gift we receive at Christmas. Not 'gifts' and 'presents' all wrapped but the greatest gift of them all. Jesus is born because someone is lonely, someone is hungry, someone is dying and someone is suffering. Jesus is born to bring us light. Jesus is born to bring us peace. And, in the words of Pope Francis, Jesus is born to bring us joy.

On Thursday night I attended the Graduation ceremony of St Aloysius College. The guest speaker was Moira Kelly, ex-student and inspiring founder of the Children's First Foundation that arranges life-saving surgery for children around the world. As Moira spoke, she radiated joy, she radiated hope and she radiated inspiration. She called on the students of St Aloysius, especially the graduating class of Year 12 to pursue all their dreams but to also put something back into the community; to take the opportunities life offers, but to also remember the poor, the marginalized and the needy in our world. Moira kept repeating over and over again that the greatest joy in life is to give and to inspire others to do the same. As we continue this season of Advent, we know these themes in our lives – to live joyfully, to work for justice, to build peace in our world.