

CHRISTMAS 2014

Since my first Christmas as a priest seventeen years ago, I have been deeply conscious that Christmas is often a difficult time for people who have had a recent death in the family, difficult for those supporting a loved one through terminal illness, difficult for those whose marriage has broken down, difficult for those struggling with the anguish of mental illness, substance abuse or a myriad of other challenges and hurdles that life seems to throw at us.

The recent tragic events in Cairns and Sydney remind us again that Christmas will be a tough time for some people. At a time when it really is a challenge to believe, to have faith in the face of such appalling tragedy and violence, the story of the Christ-child gathers us together. The story of the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem draws us together precisely in the midst of the tragedy, the sadness and the violence. In the midst of the darkness, we come to seek light. In the midst of sadness, we come to seek joy and in the midst of despair, we come to seek hope.

The birth of Jesus transforms the sadness, renews our faith and strengthens the bonds of unity. If the events of the last few weeks have taught us anything, it has taught us the importance of being together, of standing in solidarity against darkness and evil. It has taught us that the sheer over-powering force for good will always win out. It has taught us the importance of giving time and energy to the important things in life and letting go of the things that are petty, the things that are simply not important and that do not give life. We are gathered together at this Christmas celebration precisely because Jesus is born into this mystery, this reality of human life, this brokenness and his sadness. And by his birth, we are touched, transformed and renewed.

The darkness we have seen in recent weeks often leaves us silent and lost for words. But Jesus is born precisely as the Word-made-flesh, he is the Word of light in the midst of darkness, he is the Word of hope in the midst of despair, he is the Word of beauty in the midst of the violence. We come to hear this Word, to meet this Word, to celebrate this Word, to be nourished and re-invigorated and strengthened by this Word. We come to sing the praises of God for the gift of this Word just like angels did. This Word speaks truth, light, goodness, justice, joy, beauty and

hope. And this is what our hearts truly desire at this time. This Word is present here in this very gathering, in your family and mine, in your story and mine, in your sadness and in your joy. Cairns is Bethlehem. Martin Place in Sydney is Bethlehem, our celebration today is Bethlehem. What does the Christmas carol say? Come to Bethlehem and see!

We come to behold the great mystery born into our midst, the Word made flesh, a light so radiant, a joy so wonderful that angels sing God's praise, shepherds come to behold the sight, wise men come from the East to do him homage, Mary and Joseph, worried expectant parents now fear no longer and trust even more in God's promise because this Word born into their midst is the hope of all nations and the Prince of Peace.

Today, more than ever, we ask the Prince of Peace to come and visit his people, to change the hearts of those that seek only violence and to bless our families, our communities, our nation, our Church and our world with this wonderful gift of peace. This is my prayer for you today, this is my prayer for those who are suffering and those who feel alone, this is my prayer as we celebrate our unity in faith. Let the Christ-child born in Bethlehem touch our hearts and fill us with his joy.

Joy, unity, light, beauty, hope and peace; I have never prayed for these things as I pray for them today. Let us join in celebration as a community of faith and continue this spirit with our family and friends. And then let the true spirit of Christmas begin in our hearts as we have written in our parish bulletin ...to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild nations, to bring peace to all the peoples of the earth.