



Christmas Message 2017

Christmas is a season of hope for the world. We recall the birth of Christ into a time when the raw power and oppression of the Roman Empire seemed to be the permanent truth of how this world worked, when the corruption and cynicism of King Herod's regime seemed the model of achievement for those with worldly ambitions. Into that world was born a small child whose life and words would change the human story for ever. Jesus renewed and proclaimed the message of the Hebrew prophets that God was on the side of goodness and justice, on the side of the poor and the suffering. And he proclaimed the beginning of a new order of things, the Kingdom of God, in which a new world would finally take shape. He began the process that brought a new hope into being.

We still live in the hope for a better world and celebrate with joy any signs of human progress towards it. Just days before this Christmas, the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* has released its final report. It is one such source of hope for improvement in human society. For five years, the Commission has brought before the public the accounts of the almost unbelievably appalling things that have been and are done to children by sexual predators, the criminal failures of institutions to protect the children while, all too often and for utterly unworthy reasons, they protected the perpetrators, and, most importantly, the profound and tragic damage that child abuse often inflicts on the whole subsequent lives of the children abused, their families and friends and, in various ways, on whole communities. It has been a harrowing experience, but it has already effected change in the nation's consciousness of child sexual abuse.

Now the Royal Commission's Report brings the hope of real change. With findings drawn from its public and private hearings, the multitude of submissions it has received and the research it has promoted, the Commission has made hundreds of recommendations. They go to the matters of ensuring the safety of children, delivering justice and compassionate acceptance to survivors of abuse, and reforming institutional practices and cultures that have facilitated abuse and the covering-up of abuse. The Commission has also referred many matters to police for prosecution. It is, we trust and hope, a turning point. And it has attracted the attention of authorities and commentators around the world. As a highly hopeful event of world significance, it seems only right, to me at least, that the Royal Commission's report should have come so close in time to Christmas, the season of hope.

Jesus came among us as a child. He later held up the beautiful openness and trust of a child as the model for believers, 'to such as these... the kingdom of heaven belongs'. And he identifies himself with children, 'anyone who welcomes a little child like this... welcomes me'. It is a source of the greatest imaginable shame to the Christian churches, and to my Catholic Church in particular, that our priests and religious, our teachers and people, have been so deeply implicated in the crimes and cover-ups the Royal Commission has exposed and studied. We should have been better than that. In the coming months and years the church will deeply consider all the findings and recommendations of the Royal Commission. We will try to learn all that it has to teach us. Deeply conscious that when we have betrayed children, we have betrayed Christ himself, we will be doubly motivated to improve where we can on the changes that we have been making over the last twenty years in child protection and recognition of survivors. Again, it is a resolution appropriate to the Christmas season.

Finally, we know that most Australians will celebrate Christmas in one form or another. In that context it seems right to recall the remarks of Justice McClellan at the final sitting of the Commission:

The Royal Commission has been concerned with the sexual abuse of children within institutions. It is important to remember that, notwithstanding the problems we have identified, the number of children who are sexually abused in familial or other circumstances far exceeds those who are abused in institutions. The sexual abuse of any child is intolerable in a civilised society. It is the responsibility of our entire community to acknowledge that children are being abused. We must each resolve that we should do what we can to protect them.

And so I would ask all those who celebrate Christmas this year, but especially those who share the Christian hope founded upon Christmas, to make, with their families, that resolution of which the Royal Commissioner speaks: no more abuse, no more cover-ups, no more blaming or alienating of those who were abused. We can all be part of building that better humanity which the celebration of Christmas has long taught us to believe in and work for. This is a particularly hopeful Christmas. I wish all of its joys to you and those precious to you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bill Wright', with a small cross symbol to its left.

Bishop Bill Wright

Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle