

Homily for 3rd Sunday of Advent 2017

The Liturgy this weekend invites us to rejoice. Even as we bring all kinds of problems and anxieties with us we still rejoice. No matter how bad the world seems to be we still can rejoice. That is our prayer as we wait patiently to celebrate the birth of the Saviour.

You may not have read the 17 volumes of the Report from the Royal Commission released on Friday! I don't want to add much to the many voices that we will hear in days to come about it. The consequences for the Catholic Church among others will be long debated. As I read the 21 recommendations for the Catholic Church (which are quite readable) and reflect on the past five years of the inquiry the key thing for the Church seems to be the whole question of transparency.

The lack of transparency has been endemic in the structure of the Church for centuries. If I may simply share a personal anecdote to illustrate. I went to the Seminary in 1965 with all the idealism of youth from within a Catholic culture that was clear about its mission and confident in its identity as the true Church of Christ.

But in my days in the 60s at Banyo Seminary the culture of secrecy was alive and well. Within weeks of beginning our first year some young men found that it was not for them and left the Seminary. Others were asked to leave as it was felt they couldn't manage the Latin or some other inadequacy. Whatever the reason the person was sent from the Seminary in secret. It was in those days regarded as something of a scandal that a person left. It was tantamount to rejecting God's call. Often we did not know the person had left till some time later as communication was forbidden.

That is just one illustration of how the clergy absorbed a culture of secrecy and concealing failure. We did try to challenge this culture. In the turbulent years of the 60s and on this could not last. An uncritical acceptance of such traditions was not acceptable in the changing world. The origins of such behaviour have a long history and things change slowly.

With hindsight we can see things more clearly now and we need not be fearful of the debates that will take place. As some have said it is a terrible grace that we have been given. Everything is laid bare. Things hidden have been exposed to the light. People do focus on things like the secrecy of confession and so on. Because that is where secrecy is given a divine sanction by the Church. The possibility of abuse of power behind closed doors is felt most keenly in that ritual by outsiders. Whatever people might say, however, that is not the only or key issue. Rather, it is more the transparency of all Church structures and behaviours.

Paul tells the Thessalonians and us that we should "never try to suppress the Spirit or treat the gift of prophecy with contempt." The Spirit is certainly saying something to the Church today through the voices of the victims of abuse. We have to welcome the findings of the Commission as best we can. A lot has already been done in our Diocese that fulfils the recommendations. The cultural change will take a lot longer.

We listen today especially to the prophet Isaiah who brings us back to the most fundamental message that the Church exists for: "to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken; to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison; to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord." That is the mission statement that Jesus made his own. Everything else is secondary.

And as mentioned in the Newsletter, today begins a Novena of prayer before the celebration of the Nativity of the Lord. We are invited to pray in some way each day rejoicing in Mary's Yes to God's plan for her. The Gospel today begins with John the Baptist announcing that he is a witness to the light that is coming into the world. The Novena ends on Christmas Day with John telling us that the light has indeed come into the world, shining in the darkness, even though we often are blind to it or do not accept it. This is reason to rejoice always as Paul says. We rejoice precisely because the light is shining in the darkness of our world. That light is revealed in the birth of a child at Bethlehem. And therefore it can be seen in the birth of every child.

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