

17 December 2017 (3rd Sunday in Advent, Year B)

Isaiah 61:1-2,10-11; Luke 1:46-50,53-54; 1Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28.

A Time of Mourning for our Church.

On this third Sunday of Advent, a week out from Christmas, the Church invites us to reflect on John the Baptist who witnesses to the light; a very strong message as our Church walks through a night of darkness. My question is: Which light, and how do we Catholics witness to this light, today?

Last Thursday and Friday we witnessed the conclusion of a five-year Royal Commission into the Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse. While as Church and as Australians we thank the government for setting up this commission, and the commissioners for their hard work, for us it is a time to grieve and mourn as we take stock of the terrible stories of child abuse that have come to light within the Catholic institutions we were so proud of.

Where is the light we are asked to give witness to? When we look at this history and these undeniable facts we realise that we – our Church and some of our leaders – have become witnesses to darkness and not to the light. Not only did a large number of priests, religious and lay people abuse the power given to them by the Church to hurt innocent children, but our leaders have not had the courage to call them out and condemn their terrible actions. Do we still have light in our Church now?

The Church we all belong to is a divine and human Church. Unfortunately we have let the human element overcome its divine element, or rather we have let some within our ranks to abuse the divine element in order to further their criminal purposes. The light in our Church is not our humanity, but God himself. This Christmas, as we try our best to celebrate God who, knowing our intrinsic sinfulness, chose to come and live with us, we might need to keep our eyes also fixed on the cross. On the cross the body of Christ is broken for us; our experience today is that the body of Christ that is the Church, is also terribly broken.

How do I witness today? What do I witness to? I personally distance myself from all those who in any way used their power to abuse others. As member of this Church, in a way, I have authorised them to use the power given to them by this body for their own selfish ways. I strongly condemn their actions and the actions of leaders who offered them protection. I pray and hope that our leadership have now learnt of the damage these perpetrators of abuse can cause through their actions and will never again offer protection to abusers.

The light that is born for me in a humble manger in Bethlehem, and the light that is broken for me on the cross, is the only light that enlightens my faith. Over the past few decades our Church has managed to hide that light under the basket instead of putting it on a lampstand to give light to all in the room (Mt 5:15). Some among us will choose to leave the Church in protest and in anger; I do not blame them; for myself I choose to stay and try to let my little light shine for others to see.

Some of you might say that we are now tired of speaking of child abuse, and that we need to move on. We quickly get tired of painful news and move on emotionally, leaving those who are suffering behind. We as parish community and as Church cannot afford to do that; we need to continue to speak out in defence of the victims of child sexual abuse. We need to have time to sincerely listen to their stories and promise them our full emotional support. It is also the duty of each and every member of the Church and the community to report to the police any behaviour that seems to be inappropriate. We need to be fully aware and take all positive actions necessary to protect children and those who are vulnerable in our midst.

For those of us who will stay in the Church after this terrible tragedy, the Church we will belong to will look like the manger in Bethlehem, poor, tiny, humble and smelly. After all, that is exactly how Jesus chose to be born!

Fr Mario