



Bishops Message

Most Reverend Columba Macbeth-Green OSPPE



JOHN 8:32 “THEN YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH, AND THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE”

As we prepare to engage again with the examinations of the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church, we might pause to gather our thoughts and listen again to our hearts.

These coming weeks will be hard. We, as Catholics, will hear more about our confronting Church history of child sexual abuse. We will hear the truth of past abuse of children and we will be shocked and ashamed. It will be a very public shaming and it will be deserved.

We need to accept the facts of what happened and be prepared to listen to the pain that has been inflicted on innocent people. When we have listened and when we have heard, we will need then to begin asking ourselves some very serious questions.

We need to ask ourselves questions about what we have learnt from this terrible history of abuse. We need to ask questions about what we intend to do about it. We will need to ask questions about how it could have happened in the first place. We need to ask ourselves about the culture of a Church that allowed this kind of evil to exist in our own communities. They will be tough questions. The wider Australian community will be watching and waiting to see how we respond. They will wonder whether we are able to change.

The Scripture reading from Matthew this coming Sunday Feb 12th is most relevant. In Matthew 5:17-37, Christians are faced with a new standard for moral behaviour. Matthew's gospel points to the evolution of a new ethic. He points to a new way to understand righteousness and moral authority. Even when this gospel was written there was a huge gap between the teaching and the practice of the early churches. The insights revealed were eventually left behind in the wake of Paul's emphasis on the love of Christ but even here we read of Matthew's horror of hypocrisy and of his call to us to face the truth, seek justice and trust in God's mercy.

We discover that Jesus called for a radical re-ordering of priorities. We discover that our actions and behaviours are of central importance. Reading Matthew, we begin to feel the truth that it is better to sacrifice a part of one's moral freedom than to lose the whole. Matthew draws us to know that Jesus' teaching was not a passive resignation or indifference to evil. The goal was essentially to shame one into a change of heart. The wisdom of love revealed in Matthew's gospel is not a whole biblical revelation but it does represent a summit of moral wisdom we would do well to revisit.

We are exhorted at the end of reading:

“All you need say is Yes, if you mean yes. No, if you mean no; anything more comes from the evil one.”

It's a scripture passage about doing the right thing. It's about walking the talk. It's clear, it's not complicated. Just say what you need to say and do the right thing.

May we, in these coming weeks, be drawn to say the right thing and do the right thing.

I ask you all to dig deep and find the strength to face the truth of what has happened to so many good people in our Church communities. I ask you to begin thinking about how we might need to respond, about what we might need to do differently. We have already implemented important procedures and protocols designed to keep our communities safe, but they alone will not be enough. We need a change of heart. When the pain of these weeks subsides and more is revealed about the damage done to young people, we will need eventually to be prophetic again. We will need to think about how we want to become. We will need to ask the right questions about who we are and how we want to be. Ours is an extraordinary Church. It is a Church we have good reason to love and to defend. It has been full of good and upright companions who have spent their lives doing their best to follow Jesus. Our Church needs us now.

Our Church culture has had a dark side and we will not deny that and we will not let that darkness take hold again.

I pray that you will help me to nurture a better Church. I pray that you will help each other to be strong in the face of difficult times and hard truths. Our Church needs good people to rally together and rethink aspects of our culture that might need to change. It needs us to be compassionate, forgiving, courageous and generous. We can't be any of these things without prayer and without God's grace.

Let our hope be in God's love and mercy and in Christ's power to transform lives.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Columba M'.

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Bishop of Wilcannia-Forbes Diocese