

27 December 2020
Sunday after Christmas

What comes after Christmas?

The day after Christmas day is observed in the Churches liturgical Calendar as St Stephen's day. St Stephen is the first recorded Christian martyr, stoned to death by those who saw him as a threat to the established Jewish faith, his stoning witnessed by Saul, later to become Paul apostle of Jesus and bearer of the Christian faith to the gentile world. Stephen's death reminds us that the babe born in Bethlehem is the same person who was to be crucified at the hands of the religious and political leaders of the day some 33 years later. The link between the two events is so often conveniently forgotten, for who wants to remember the tragic, yet life giving death of a baby at Christmas?

Then follows the feast of the Holy Innocents. Feast is probably the wrong word for it is the account of Herod's action in having murdered all the male children 2 years and under at the time of the birth of Jesus to protect his own authority and power. This has focused my thoughts this week on the plight of children in many parts of the world.

One often hears at this time of year that Christmas is for children. A time where children are the centre of attention and provide a focal point for the gathering of many families across the world embracing the many dimensions of religious, cultural and consumer elements. I certainly remember the time our first child experienced Christmas or perhaps the expectations that we his parents and grandparents anticipated for the day. If I recall correctly, he slept most of the day and only paid scant attention to the many gifts from family members.

For a number of years, I was a Board member of the International Forum for Child welfare a UN sponsored organization that promoted the needs of children across the world.

Throughout my term of nine years the message was loud and clear that, in spite of the rhetoric worldwide on the rights and needs of children as paramount, the words are not matched by a political will the necessary resources in others. The recent abduction of school children in Nigeria, an event that occurred also a few years earlier is a stark example of how the lives of children are abused by those with power and apparently no moral compass. In some country's children are seen as expendable, abused, exploited and sold into slavery for the profit of others. The recent report of the Royal Commission has exposed failures when it comes to the protection of children although we seem at one level to have learnt nothing with our treatment of the children of refugees and asylum seekers.

In many countries the needs of children appear to be ignored when governments find it necessary to make hard decisions about budget allocations. Many children's services, education, housing and health programs are impaired and suffer as a result. When companies and governments down-size and unemployment grow as a result it is often the children who bear the brunt and their futures and potential for growth restricted, compromised and violated. Children and their needs do not seem to be at the top of the agenda or of the highest priority of economists and governments when solutions are being discussed to address global financial challenges with their voices drowned out by more powerful lobby groups. While banks, financial institutions and speculators are reassured and supported, children and families find themselves struggling to pay the bills and to remain hopeful and

positive. While pensioners, workingmen and women receive small if any wage increases, the same cannot be said of many business leaders and professionals. Ethics and morality including a concern for one 's neighbour is replaced by self-interest. While charitable giving to worthy causes is admirable it is not a replacement for policies which discriminate against those least able to afford it or who lack real choice.

There are of course those who do challenge the actions of governments, rating agencies and powerful corporations when they fail to hear and listen to the cries and calls of children and families.

Many of these voices however are silenced or even ridiculed by sections of the media and other commentators, politicians and powerful operators without any sense of a shared or communal responsibility. Charitable and community organizations that deal directly with the fallout from economic and social policy strongly object and argue for a more just and equitable response to the needs of those disadvantaged. Charitable giving at Christmas time while welcome is however not sufficient.

What then comes after Christmas?

More of the same?

1. packing up the Christmas tree to next year.
2. Goodbye to family and friends
3. The Boxing Day test or sales. Did you see the crowd at Chadstone or Doncaster.?
4. Back to work and the daily routine.

Has Christmas in any way changed how we see the world and our response to the challenges we face? What comes after Christmas for you?

On this Sunday we are reminded that Christmas is not just a blip, a blink of light, a passing celebration but rather an enduring message for all time. An event, a happening that should impact on our daily lives. It should change us in some way to be the people that God calls us to be, a light shining in the darkness in the ordinary of our lives. It is the fullness of life that is offered for all. An enduring life of hope and resilience.

The story of the birth of Jesus on that first Christmas is not just about there being any room in the inn, nor about a homeless child and refugee family some 2000 years ago. It is an account, a statement, a proclamation about the possibilities that are offered for the redemption of the whole human condition if we can gain a glimpse of the gift offered. A gift that calls us to live our own lives as he lived, to share our resources with those who cannot provide their own, or who are victims of abuse, exploitation and poverty and to offer hospitality and care.

The birth of Jesus should be an unsettling moment when we see in the poverty of today the child in a manger. This is a reminder to us that our identity and being, our own redemption is compromised when we neglect the needs of frightened and lost children in today's world. Children are not only the future they are the present and they place their trust in us doing the right thing. Children are innocent they rely on adults to lead and trust others to protect and care for them.

Ray Cleary