Occasional Address

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Multi-Faith Observance
The Order of Australia Association
New South Wales Branch
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Thank you for the signal honour of delivering this occasional address to the annual Multi-Faith Observance of the New South Wales Branch of the Order of Australia Association. I am sure I speak for all of you in expressing gratitude to Sr St Jude Doyle OAM for her organization of this event and to Shinee Hammond and the girls of the St Vincent’s Garraway Dance Troupe who have welcomed us to country and acknowledged the traditional owners of this place.

“My dear brothers and sisters, we must love one another because love comes from God”. (I Jn 4:7) We come as members of the Order of Australia. We come as people of faith and citizens of one of the world’s most blessed democracies. Here in Sydney we are marking the 10th anniversary of the 2000 Olympic Games. Then we showed ourselves to the world at our best. Each of us has our memories of those great days here in Sydney. We displayed nationalism as a reflection of humanity’s noblest means of living in community. I was living and working in East Timor at the time. I recall racing back from Bacau to Dili to find a pub where I might join my countrymen and watch Cathy Freeman win gold for the nation and for her people. We all felt such pride as an Aboriginal Australian crossed the line on merit and then circumnavigated the stadium carrying two flags – Australian and Aboriginal.

Some months later, my pride turned to shame when Australian officials in Dili were asking the Timorese to accept 433 asylum seekers who had been picked up at sea on the MV Tampa. There were still tens of thousands of people displaced in East Timor;

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Dili was still Ground Zero. The Timorese were minded to do us a favour in return for the favour we had done in standing by them in their hour of need. Sergio de Mello, the head of the UN operation, was not impressed. We Australians were told to solve our own problems.

When I returned to Australia in early 2002, I visited asylum seekers being detained at Woomera in the middle of the desert. I met with a group of Palestinians whose refugee claims had been rejected. They had no homes to which they could go. The Australian government was having great difficulty in moving them. In the end, one of the Palestinians, Akram Al Masri, decided to challenge the legality of his detention in court. His case was then listed before Justice Merkel. I felt obliged to inform the Palestinians that the judge was Jewish with a fine reputation for upholding human rights. It was unimaginable that he would discriminate against them on the basis of their race or religion. Akram won his case and was released from detention. The next time I returned to Woomera, the three remaining Palestinians were like the little green bottles on the wall. There was one less of them. They decided that they would also like to take a case to court. Their first question to me, with a smile, was, “Do you think we could get the Jewish judge again?” In the middle of the Australian desert, in one of the most wretched institutions ever erected on Australian soil, some of the most complex conflicts seemed resolvable. There is hope when persons are treated with dignity and respect under the rule of law regardless of the history and the politics. Australia is a place where we can transcend racial, ethnic, cultural and religious differences.

Nationalism can be jingoistic or discriminatory and exclusionary against others. Australia is a blessed land, a lucky country. This is a land where can profess love for neighbour regardless of race, ethnicity or religion. Whatever our religious creed, and whatever our faith community, we can respond to the call of Jesus in today’s gospel “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Mk 12:31)

We are the lucky country, but we are not God’s Chosen People. There is only one people who make that claim in faith. There are limits to nationalism and limits to any simplistic identification with the Chosen People of the Old Testament. Those of us who believe in God can reflect on what our God is asking of us – of each of us, of
all of us – whether we be a tribal head, an elder, a government official, a stranger within the camp, a woodchopper or a water drawer (Deut 29:9).

We don’t live in a theocracy, and most of us are very pleased about that. We delight in the freedom of a public square where no religious or philosophical perspective is Trumps. Every viewpoint has a place at the table – or it should. No world view is privileged above all others – or it should not be – and that goes for secularism as well as any of the great world religions. God spare us from religious fundamentalism and rampant secularism.

We have leaders of political parties who are professedly atheist as well as those who are proud to own their religious faith. We have the uncertainty of a hung parliament but we have the Constitution and the conventions that allow us to avoid violence and instability, ensuring legitimacy for even the most fragile of coalitions.

This week a captain of industry has put out the challenge that we need to lead the world by taking action on climate change; others are more circumspect anxious that anything more than following the pack will be contrary to our enlightened self interest.

As individuals, as communities, and as a nation, we are invited to choose life, not death, blessing not curse. “Choose life if you and your offspring would live”. (Deut 30:19) This choice requires intelligence, integrity, courage and humility – individually and collectively.

Ten years on, Cathy Freeman is doing much to help her people. We are still trying to work out a decent way to maintain border security while providing asylum for bona fide refugees so that we can continue to sing: “For those who comes across the seas, we’ve boundless plains to share.”

Years ago, I met with a fringe dwelling group of Aborigines from Mantaka near Kuranda in North Queensland. They were squatted beside the Barron River. Across the river was a multi million dollar weekender built by a Melbourne businessman who used to bring his family in by helicopter. At the end of the meeting, the Aboriginal
woman who convened the meeting pointed across the river and told me about the house and its occupants. On the roof was “a helipad” – a new word for the traditional owners in that part of Australia. I later told the story at a school priding itself on providing an education for justice. The Year 12 boys asked all sorts of prying questions about the Aborigines and I was unable to give them satisfactory answers. They asked, “If Aborigines want houses, why don’t they build them for themselves?”, “What are they complaining about? If the white man did not come, they would not even have a water supply?”, “What’s wrong with the businessman having a holiday house? Afterall, if he did not earn a lot of money and pay his taxes, we would not be able to pay Aborigines for welfare?” In the end, I simply asked them one question in return, “Which side of the river are you standing on as you ask your questions?” Can you see that there are just as many unanswerable questions that you can ask from the other side of the river? Mind you, they are very different questions.

We need to be able to cross to the other side of the river, asking each other for help and offering each other the water of life. We can build the bridges that allow us to experience the reality on either side of the river, affirming that there is a time and a season for everything under heaven.

We don’t need to look overseas or up to the heavens – the message, the answer, is in our hearts. We do not need to say: “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” Nor do we need to say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” “No the thing it very close to us, in our mouths, and in our hearts, to observe it.” (Deut 30:11-14)

As religious believers and as members of the Order of Australia, we take a justifiable pride in our national identity and we have the confidence that our relationship with God can shape for the better our contribution to our community, to our professions and our workplaces. But we are called to be prophetic and a little challenging to each other and to our fellow citizens.

Australia is a great place to live but there are still people who miss out, those who fall through the cracks, those who do not get a fair go. Last year I was privileged to chair
the National Human Rights Consultation for the Commonwealth Government. My committee found that 2/3 of us think that human rights are adequately protected in Australia. But it is not unAustralain to ask how we can do better. More than 70% of us think that those suffering mental illness, the aged, and those living with a disability need better protection of their human rights. There is plenty of work for us still to do.

There is also plenty of reflective thinking for us to do. As people of peace and hope, we did commit to a war in Iraq which has had radically unintended adverse consequences. The level of self-questioning here in Australia is much less than in the US or in the UK. Perhaps we are a little too lay-back, too accepting that these decisions are made primarily by the senior partners in any coalition. There may be a time for war and a time for peace. But it is not good enough for us simply to go with the flow unreflectively resigned to the thought that “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven”. (Eccles 3:8) Now might just not be the right time. Unlike the US, we don’t carry an ultimate sense of responsibility for peace and security in the world. It is very easy to luxuriate in being a second order power.

Let me offer a blessing to conclude. In 1985, I was walking along the beach at Mapoon on the west coast of Cape York in far north Queensland and saw the largest mango tree I had ever seen. Mapoon had been established as a Presbyterian Aboriginal mission in the nineteenth century. Under the tree I saw Jean Jimmy who had just become a great great grandmother. As ever she was rolling a cigarette. I admired the tree and asked if the missionaries had planted it. “No”, she replied, “I planted this tree. I am very blessed to sit under the shade of this tree and to see it bearing fruit.” We are blessed to sit under the tree. We are even more blessed to be sent as builders of a peaceful and hope-filled Australia. As we contemplate life under our own mango tree, let’s resonate with Master Shantideva’s Bodhisattva’s Way of Life: “May the forlorn find hope, Constant happiness, and prosperity. May there be timely rains And bountiful harvests.”