Easter 5

The New Shofar

Yet those who wait for Yahweh Will gain new strength; They will mount up with wings like eagles, They will run and not get tired, They will walk and not become weary." Isaiah 40:31

What the world needs now is HOPE

When I was going through a difficult time after my resignation as Bishop, I came to understand the importance of talking about issues impacting on our lives. Being a good healthy sports mad Aussie male, I was loath to talk about it. I was blessed in that I was treated by an excellent Christian psychiatrist for a few years but coming to terms with a mental health issue is an ongoing engagement and there is always the chance of slipping back. The ***black dog*** of depression. It is a hidden illness in that it has no bandages, no external signs apart from behavioural activity. You cannot pick the depressed person from out of the crowd at the MCG. Their pain is usually silent, but we are there in our hundreds and thousands looking for **Hope**, searching for divine grace.

The reality in Australia is that there is an estimated **1 in 5 adults** (21.5% or 4.3 million people) who experience a mental disorder in any given year. Specifically, *according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS),* 17.2% have an anxiety disorder, 7.5% have an affective disorder, and 3.3% have a substance use disorder. Additionally, **1 in 7 children** and adolescents (ages 4-17) experience a mental illness.

Here is a more detailed breakdown:

1 in 5 Australians (21.5% or 4.3 million people) experience a mental disorder in the previous 12 months.

- **17.2% of Australians** have experienced an anxiety disorder in the past year (3.4 million people) . ……**7.5% of Australians** have experienced an affective disorder in the past year (1.5 million people) . …….**3.3% of Australians** have experienced a substance use disorder in the past year (647,900 people) .

The Dark Night of the Soul - John of the Cross

The phrase often used by spiritual writers for these mental struggles and for internal spiritual struggles is the “dark night of the soul”. It is a poem written by **St. John of the Cross (**1542-1591), a Spanish Carmelite monk and mystic. This poem outlines the soul’s journey from the distractions and entanglements of the world to the perfect peace and harmony of union with God. The use of darkness to describe the inner turbulence is an apt one. Those struggling in this way yearn for light.

The monk taught that one seeking God will cast off all attachments to this world and live a life of asceticism, like the disciples in the boat during the storm. Stop looking at the wind and the waves because there is nothing they could do about weather. Forget about saving the boat, Peter stepped out and walked on water towards Jesus. Jesus Christ is the answer. He is there in the darkness in which struggle. Before attaining union with God, however, the soul must pass through a personal experience of Christ’s

passion. This time of testing and agony is accompanied by confusion, fear, and uncertainty—including doubts about God—but on the other side sits Christ's glory, serenity, and a mystical union with God. And it is there, beneath the cross on which Jesus suffered, that Hope is found.

The dark night is not pleasant, or comfortable. What it can do is lead us to God, the God who is ever-present. Thus, John can speak of the darkness as being a "happy night" and a "night more lovely than the dawn." At the end of one's journey, he concludes, God takes away all feeling, leaving the traveller senseless to everything except the presence of God Himself. The searching and not just the finding is the source of divine grace.

If Jesus is the answer, where is our (the Church) preaching and witness?

For Saint John of the Cross, the dark night was not about God being absent. We often need to experience the dark night to truly see the light of the new day. The poem was about the joy we find in the journey to unite with God. It is about the fact that God is present all times, but we go through a time of purging and illumination to find that union. We may not sense him, but God is there. Always. And so, there is Hope. Always.

The story of J**ohn 21:1-19** is familiar. Jesus has come to the shoreline where the disciples have had a frustratingly bad night of fishing. After spending an entire night out on the water with nothing to show for it had to have felt like failure.

They were experiencing a dark night — maybe not as dark as you or I have experienced, but it was a dark night for them. Jesus was gone, they were alone, and they had failed to catch anything after all that work. What was the point of this pain? Why continue?

There is no such thing as an absence of God, only human blindness

During a *dark night*, they receive instruction and take it. And in the presence of Jesus their circumstances are transformed. In the presence of the Lord, all things can become new. Even when we fail, even when we find ourselves in our own "dark night of the soul," Jesus forgives and continues to call us to be part of his flock and to tend his sheep. He chases after us, calls us home. For the disciples, Hope came in the morning — in the presence of Jesus, in following Jesus, and in being given the charge to keep on following.

Unfortunately, many all around us have this same pain of despair right now. They feel lost, alone, neglected, and hopeless. They feel the sting of rejection and prejudice. They cannot see any light at all and have no desire to wait for the morning. This is where it is hard. Amid the darkness of night, we strive to find that God who is there. When we think we are alone — God is there. But it is only through the Church, through the prayers, witness and compassion of believers that those in darkness can find that Light of Christ.

If the Church is going to bear fruit from our spiritual disciplines of **HOPE2025** we need to make some commitments about our mission to enlighten the world with hope. What are we going to do? Was it all just one more programme of renewal that will not endure beyond its closing date? Without plans drawn up in listening to the Spirit, the world will stumble on rudderless, relying on the sterile hopes this world throws up.