

Love is the heart of everything

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Long before there was such a thing as Australia there were families who lived here, people who cared for each other and the earth, people for whom the world was a deeply spiritual place, people who loved to tell stories about the things that really mattered to them: their dreams and their struggles, their hopes and their passions.

Then there was a giant cataclysm.

Families were broken. Some were massacred. Many were taken away from each other. Dreams were torn apart, the sacred was trampled upon. It wasn't just the land that was colonised; families were made to feel the wounds of dispossession.

I respectfully dedicate these few words to the Elders and Custodians of the land we now call Australia.

Let us cherish, and learn from, the strong meaning of *family* among the diverse traditions of the First Peoples of this land.

When we reflect on the sacredness of the family we are sadly reminded of the Stolen Generations, the Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their parents. Here is one of their stories:

It was winter 1957, seven o'clock in the morning. The sun was up and the sounds of birds drifted down into our small kitchen. My brother Lenny was sitting on the floor, eating toast; my brothers Murray and David and I, rubbing our eyes in a state of half sleep, were waiting for mum to smear Vegemite on our bread before we dressed for school. A routine day in the Simon household.

Someone rapped loudly on the door. My mother didn't answer it. We hadn't heard anyone come up the path. The knocking got louder, and finally my mother, who was reluctant to answer any callers when my father wasn't home, opened the door and exchanged words with three people. We strained to hear what they were saying. Three men then entered the room.

A man in a suit ordered my mother to pick up Lenny and give him to me. My mother started to scream. One of the policemen bent down and picked up my brother and handed him to me. My mother screamed and sobbed hysterically but the men took no notice, and forced my brothers and me into a car.

My mother ran out onto the road, fell on her knees and belted her fists into the bitumen as she screamed. We looked back as the car drove off to see her hammering her fists into the road, the tears streaming down her face...

The family is not an abstract idea. For the community of faith, empowered and inspired by the Incarnation, we know the family to be real flesh and blood, real hopes and dreams, real struggles and sufferings.

Families in desperation have embarked on dangerous journeys across the seas in dilapidated vessels. Scarred by torture, rape and the disappearance or death of their loved ones, these families are now being sentenced to the unjust limbo of life on Nauru.

Families are torn apart by incarceration in the prisons and Juvenile Detention Facilities across Australia, a reality that impacts disproportionately on the families of the First Peoples. Being locked up follows hot on the heels of being locked out. Exclusion begets incarceration. Humiliation begets disempowerment. Or rage.

We should pause to reflect on the unabated history of Aboriginal deaths in custody; of the most recent Inquest into the death in custody of Mr Briscoe in Alice Springs earlier this year.

How can we not see in these deaths in custody Christ being tortured to death on the cross while his mother watches in unimaginable pain, a representation of the family in the age of exclusion?

We might be tempted to think of the family in saccharine-sweet terms. But let us be honest. This is a figment of the consumer-centred imagination.

The majority of the families across the globe can intimately recognise, and identify with, both the beginning of Christ's journey in the family forced to live on the literal edges of society, and the end of his journey in the family forced to suffer unthinkable pain.

The story of the Incarnation provides us with a prophetic intervention into the consumerist society of the 21st Century. We have weighed ourselves down with the worship of idols created in order to keep us obedient to the demands of the market. We are duped into thinking that we freely consume when in fact it is we who are consumed.

The Majority World, however, the poor of the earth, the struggling families of the earth who are least likely to come to mind when the concept of the family is invoked by the comfortable; these families, crushed by the weight of oppressive structures and stinging histories; these are the families who, above all others, have the capacity to speak prophetically to our time. These are the families who incarnate the humanity of God. They most closely mirror the lived experience of Jesus of Nazareth, the Worker, the Teacher, the Brother of the Poor, God with us.

We need to look to the margins, which are really the heart of our society. We need to listen to the whispers from the edge that another kind of world is possible.

The 1975 Commission of Inquiry into Povertyⁱ noted that:

If poverty is seen as a result of structural inequality within society, any serious attempt to eliminate poverty must seek to change those conditions which produce it.

This finding was reinforced by the groundbreaking Social Justice Statement of the Australian Bishops in 1996, in which they articulated the bold prophetic message that the causes of

poverty are structural and historical and that people should not be blamed for their own exclusion:

In the main, people are poor not because they are lazy or lacking in ability or because they are unlucky. They are poor because of the way society, including its economic system, is organised.

We live in a time of market-idolatry. Governments too often follow the path of withdrawing from some of their key responsibilities. This has resulted in essential services being left to the market to provide. The market is an excellent mechanism for producing an array of choices for consumers who have the means to participate within its parameters. It can also be a powerful means for encouraging innovation. It is able to move rapidly and is accustomed to constant change.

The market, however, is not good at ensuring a fair and equitable distribution of essential goods and services. It is not designed to protect and support families doing it tough on the fringes of the labour market. It is designed to maximise profits. But as Blessed John Paul II observed:

The needs of the poor take priority over the desires of the rich; the rights of workers over the maximisation of profits.

The needs of the people in the lowest 20% of the income distribution must take priority over the desires of the people in the highest 20%.

The rights of workers, including families who have been residualised by the labour market and who are forced to rely on social security, as well as those whose working lives are fraught with insecurity and devalued by inadequate pay, must take priority over the maximisation of profits.

It is a noteworthy sign of hope that yesterday the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights released a report that called into question the acceptability of shifting 100,000 sole parents onto the significantly lower Newstart Allowance. The St Vincent de Paul Society, along with many other organisations, asked this Committee to test this measure's compatibility with Australia's international human rights obligations. While the battle is far from over, we welcome the opportunity to be able to make use of the human rights framework as a means of advocating for these families and we commit ourselves to the long-term struggle to protect the rights of people who have been excluded.

While the state has an essential role in ensuring that such human rights as health, housing and education are guaranteed to all families, the state is not the family!

We therefore express a genuine sense of alarm over the state's movement in the direction of paternalism, particularly over the lives of families who are experiencing the worst effects of social and economic exclusion. Discriminatory and stigmatising practices such as the imposition of compulsory income management on disadvantaged families, starting with the families of the First Peoples, are deeply disrespectful to the dignity of families who are struggling for such reasons as long-term unemployment, sickness, disability, sole parenthood or advanced age.

Such punitive practices only drive people further into exclusion. They pander to the demeaning politics of “welfare bashing.”

Our problem in Australia is not the “idleness of the poor”, as proposed by these apologists for low social expenditure. Putting the boot into disadvantaged Australians does not help even one person into employment. Our problem is inequality. This is a social question, not a question of behaviour. We do irreparable harm when we turn it into a question of individual behaviour, blaming people for their own poverty.

We build massive walls around people on the basis of their race, class, gender or disability. The same people are then condemned for lacking the “aspiration” to scale these walls.

Our task is to have the humility to listen to the people who can teach us how society needs to change.

It is about committing ourselves to join in the long-haul project of tearing down the walls that we have built around people, locking them out, or locking them up.

It means laying claim to the words of Jesus of Nazareth that the Kingdom of God is among us. It means, as Paul of Tarsus put it, hoping against hope and fighting against all odds for a more just and compassionate society. It means, in the words of the poet Paul Eluard, who is really paraphrasing the words of Christ: *There is another world but it is in this one.*

Listen to the beautiful opening words of *Gaudium et Spes*:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.

Nothing genuinely human should fail to raise an echo in our hearts.

For love is the heart of everything.

And love is deeply respectful. It is unafraid of diversity. It is joined at the hip with justice and dignity. It is both the means and the end of our journey towards liberation.

I will leave you therefore with the words of Lilla Watson and a group of Aboriginal activists in Queensland in the 1970s:

*If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine,
then let us work together.*

ⁱ Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, *First Main Report: Poverty in Australia*, AGPS, Canberra, 1975, p.viii.