

## **2017 Easter message from Bishop Bill Wright, Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle**

The ancient Hebrew people, like every other human society, had to try to make sense of their world. And like every society, part of what they saw around them was a certain prevalence of greed, selfishness, violence and all the things we collectively call 'evil'. Like our own indigenous people, the Hebrews used to explain their world to themselves by telling stories of the things that had happened to the ancestors long, long ago to make things the way they are now. So it was they told stories around their campfires of how the first ancestors had had it good but had broken God's rules and a world of troubles had flowed from that.

One significant part of that Adam and Eve story is what happens after the first sin. All we're told is that Adam and Eve feel shame. They hide, they literally cover themselves up, and then they start blaming each other and the wretched serpent. That's shame. It's not feeling proper guilt, the pangs of conscience when you recognise and take responsibility for the wrong you've done. And neither of these, shame or guilt, measures up to the Christian idea of repentance. Repentance is deep sorrow for the wrong done, a decision to do whatever you can to make it right and, above all, a determination to change. 'Repentance', as the Latin root of the word suggests, is a 're-thinking' of the direction of your life, of how you're living, of what you're on about.

Our church in these past years has been living through a period of experiencing all these reactions to our wrongdoing. Great evil has been done by some of our people and leaders. Sexual abuse of children. As this has come to light, there has certainly been shame. But as always, shame is an utterly inadequate response, what with its hiding, its covering up, its looking for excuses and its blaming others. There has been proper guilt too in many quarters, with its sorrow for the harm done and acceptance of responsibility. Of course most Catholics, most of you, have no personal responsibility for the crimes or cover-ups. But many of us are still deeply uneasy, to say the least, that perhaps there was something in our Catholic way of doing things, in our habits of mind, our ways of relating, in the way we put value too much value on some things and not enough on others – in what the Royal Commission calls 'the Catholic Culture' – that first allowed abuse to go undetected and then allowed it not to be exposed, punished and stopped. Some of us feel a sort of community guilt about that, a communal responsibility. But where we need to get to is repentance.

We're just finishing Lent, the time each year that calls us to repentance. Let's recall: Repentance is beyond feeling shame, it's beyond feeling sorry, it's beyond feeling guilty. Repentance is taking a good hard look at what we're on about as Christians, it is about real sorrow for the harm we cause, and it is

absolutely about being determined to change, or rather to let the grace and Spirit of God into our lives to change us.

Now in our calendar we are coming to Easter. But there is no Easter morning without its Good Friday afternoon; there is no rising to new life without the pain of giving up the old life on the cross, there is no salvation from our sins without repentance and changing.

'Repent and believe the Good News' was Jesus first and fundamental preaching. I hope and pray that each of you will experience the hope that is in the Good News of Jesus' resurrection again this Easter 2017. And I hope and pray that, in the months, years and decades ahead, we will as a church observe an extended Lent of getting beyond shame and guilt to genuine repentance. On the basis of real sorrow, desire to make amends and determination to change, may we come, together, in time, to a new Easter dawn: a new life as a better, gentler, humbler, more caring and holier church. We still have some dying to do, but we are a people who see, in the dying to old ways, the promise of new life. We are an Easter people.