

Christmas Message 2024 Bishop Shane Mackinlay

Full version

I was fortunate to spend most of October in Rome as a member of Pope Francis' Synod for a Synodal Church. While the streets of Rome are always busy and somewhat chaotic, there was an extra dimension this year. Everywhere I turned, roads were blocked off and buildings and monuments were covered over with signs that read '*in restauro*' ('under restoration'), in preparation for the Jubilee Year that commences on Christmas Eve. Every twenty-five years, we celebrate a jubilee of the birth of Jesus. The *restauro* should be finished in time for next year's jubilee, so that the forty million pilgrims who are expected in Rome will be able to travel around on a brand-new metro line as they visit the various restored monuments and churches.

Next year's jubilee has been named the Jubilee Year of Hope. It's a simple message, and one that we need at least as much as Rome needs a new metro line and freshly restored buildings. We are surrounded by so many events that undermine hope. Wars continue in Ukraine and the Holy Land, violence has now spilled over into Lebanon, and there is terrible suffering for the civilian populations in all these places, with injuries and deaths, homes destroyed, residents displaced, and severe shortages of food and medical help. This suffering is felt around the world, with protests calling for political action, and direct threats to many Jewish communities, including this month's shameful arson attack on a Melbourne synagogue. In political and social life, there seems to be a growing fragmentation, anger and distrust, which makes cooperation and constructive action ever more difficult. We are fortunate that this is less pronounced in Australia than in some parts of the world, but there are concerning signs here too.

So a Jubilee of Hope is very timely. Even without joining the crowds in Rome, each of us can celebrate a jubilee of hope. In our families and communities, we can look for the signs of hope and inspiration around us, and take time to celebrate them and show our appreciation.

In our Church context, I think the Synod for a Synodal Church has itself been a great experience of hope. The various consultative stages around the world have themselves drawn an astonishing number of people into contributing to a shared undertaking, and its two sessions in Rome, held last year and this year, have been a prophetic event in a world where fragmentation and distrust are so dominant. Dialogue, listening and working together in a collaboration that respects differences and tensions have built a commitment to renew our Church as a communion that proclaims God's welcome and love, inviting all the baptised to take up Jesus' mission of building up the reign of God. Our challenge throughout the Church over the coming years will be to take the insights and decisions of the Synod and ensure that they are acted on in concrete ways in all the dimensions of our life together.

This is not a new mission, of course. It began at the first moment that God brought creation to life, and reached its most concrete form in the life and ministry of Jesus, whose birth we celebrate again at Christmas. He proclaimed God's gift of peace and love, and his utter commitment to this, even to giving his life on the cross, leads to our ultimate source of hope in the new life of his resurrection.

As we come together in our families and communities this Christmas, alongside the joy and excitement of gathering together there will be experiences of tension and disappointment, which again invite us to be people who embody hope and love. Jesus' message of joy and peace calls us to renew our commitment to ensure that each person we meet is valued and respected, that their voice is heard, and that practical actions are taken to respond to the needs around us. As we strive for that, we take confidence in the faithful love of the God who sent Jesus amongst us and who promises to continue walking with us as we go forward together on our journey.

As we prepare to begin the Jubilee Year of Hope, I wish each of you and those you love the joy, peace and hope of this Christmas season.

Newspaper version

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