

St George's Cathedral Perth

Interfaith Peace Service

Address by the Honourable Kim Beazley AC Governor of Western Australia

Wednesday, 24th October 2018

I would firstly like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet – the Noongar people – and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I understand the Dean was approached by folk of the Muslim and Jewish faith to offer thoughts and prayers for the multitude of civilians killed, maimed, abused, vandalised and driven to be refugees arising from contemporary conflict.

Here offering those prayers are members of the faiths of a diaspora who were here or have settled here: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Ba'hai, Quaker and indigenous. This is an inspirational representation of the multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-faith community we have become.

Before we go to the broad picture we must imagine the small. The many eviscerated communities are made of individuals of simple aspirations. The men and women have personalities developed by the dignity that comes with establishing families, offering each other and their children and grandchildren sustenance and security. Organising broader communities based on mutual respect including within that framework religious observance, educational opportunity, work pursuits and relationships with other communities. There may not be wealth here but there is dignity and hope.

As criminal power or ideologically directed violence hits them, every facet of that joy and dignity is taken from them as parents can no longer protect each other or their children. They are dead, or at best psychologically traumatised and driven into helpless refugee status. It is for these that we pray. The perpetrators will answer for it but probably not in this life. About the next, as President Abraham Lincoln said in his second inaugural address, *“the ways of the Lord are righteous altogether”*.

We need to look at trends and statistics. The 20th Century brought industrial scale carnage and with it the prospect for appalling damage to those not directly involved. World War I saw 15% of the deaths, civilian. 65% in World War II. In current conflicts, 90%. In World War II some of that was collateral. 22,000 Frenchmen around D-Day. But World War II brought into play what this industrial change and power permitted – civilians as the targets themselves, in particular for the elimination of races and groups.

Awful though contemporary deliberate slaughter of racial, ethnic, or religious adherents are now, none yet supplants the Shoah as the most systematic and effective manifestation of official and communal evil. But some are doing their worst, limited only by power and reach. Escaping that reach has seen refugees and displaced persons numbers grow from 2.4 million in the 1970s to over 60 million now. Many of those refugees are a product of so called ethnic cleansing, driving a religious or racial group out for the purpose of supplanting it or killing them if they fail conversion. Though it is not treated as such frankly that is an act of war by the perpetrators on those who have to bear the burden of their actions. It is an act of war on the people. It is also on the neighbours who often can ill afford the care. Jordanians and Turks come to mind here.

As I said, the increase of the civilian component of war caused deaths is not an accident. It is a product of deliberation. In the middle of last century overwhelmingly civilian deaths were a product of interstate violence. This century has been essentially civil and communal. Their lethality is either increased or subdued by external intervention which can give the appearance of interstate violence but the civil origins and character is sustained.

Personally I have found this invitation confronting. Part of that extends from the fact that much of my public life of some 33 years has revolved around the organisation of kinetic capacities to defend our country and more indirectly work to facilitate our engagement with one side in those civil wars or peacekeeping. This heightens the sense that we need deep understanding of the environments we enter. We of a secular nation need to respect and understand those of a different set of values.

Secondly, as someone of religious belief, I have to accept that those who are religiously motivated are the main cause of mayhem now. The wars of the middle part of last century have to be owned by the atheists. Those of the first part of this century need to be owned by us and we need to both pray for the victims and aid the violated and displaced. But we also need self-reflection.

The first thing to note that in our foundational texts perverted justification can be found for violence and oppression. Overwhelmingly the theological weight is with humanity, love and tolerance for neighbours with different beliefs. We are therefore in an argument with those of our co-religionists of rigid literalist interpretation out of context with the contemporary world in all our theologies (Quakers excepted). As believers that is our responsibility. Across the globe you would like governments to take this up. But in our secular society there is especial obligation on us who are part of the religious minority. There is no doubt that among our secular siblings in this country that religious violence exhibited elsewhere undermines the moral basis of our claims for a virtuous life. It is a case in their minds of “physician heal thyself”.

We need further to influence how our leadership conducts itself in its external relations. We are not bad at relationships with the faithful of other communities. But we could be better.

Former US secretary of State Madeline Albright was onto something when she said, *“In the future, no American ambassador should be assigned to a country where religious feelings are strong unless he or she has a deep understanding of the faiths commonly practiced there ... The State Department should hire or train a core of specialists in religion to be deployed both in Washington and in key embassies overseas.”*

We take special responsibility for aid and engagement with the South Pacific. Most are deeply Christian societies and they know we are not. They are suspicious of our intentions for them often in our aid programme. As specialist Pacific journalist Bruce Hill said, *“Our current secularism is not looked on with favour by many in the islands – something we don’t always grasp.”* This is not a case for forced indoctrination of diplomats. It is for their sensitivity training and it is for those of us who support NGOs in the region to assist with that as generally we are aware.

In terms of direct interaction with those who may become victims of religiously motivated coercion the Australian Army has become more adept at sensitivity. In both Afghanistan and Iraq chaplains have been an important part of the outreach of commanders. They in turn have been helped by the Muslim community here in their outreach to religious figures in the area of operation. We walk on egg shells. We do understand that we live in a zone which entails the bulk of the world’s Muslim population which, if current population trends continue, may be the majority religious group of people of the book by the middle of this century.

We have to understand that we are not in an ethnically or culturally homogenous zone as our European and North American friends are. We are a small population in the most populous zone on the globe. We cannot afford political exploitation here of communal sentiment. More than any other nation our survival demands that we seek respect and harmony among all our multi-religious and multicultural population. Those of us here owe our fellow Australians leadership in that regard. Leadership based on humility because we know some among our co-religionists are the essence of the problem.

But I return to where I started. The image we need in our mind's eye. Transposing our own expectations of fruitful, dignified family and community life sustaining our sense of self-worth. We see ourselves as protectors and sustainers – even if a little desperate from time to time. Strip that from us and we are psychologically destroyed. Put in the slaughter and violation of our dearest and we are physically destroyed. Labouring against any religious, ethnic community ideology that wages war on a section of humanity is a duty. The circumstances and the consequences must always be in our prayers.