

## **Palm Sunday Address Canberra**

**Sunday 24 March 2024**

**Fr John Woods**

Last month I visited the Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney. Some 50,000 of the 80,000 convicts transported to the Colony of New South Wales passed through there. In many cases their crimes were trifling. They had endured an arduous sea voyage, followed by hard labour, poor food and poor health in cramped living conditions, with severe punishment if they stepped out of line, all in the hope of obtaining a 'ticket of leave' so as to get on with their life.

The barracks were later used to house poor women and the mentally ill. Going to school here in Canberra in the 1960's I cannot recall anyone being proud of their convict forebears. Come the Bi-Centenary, many Australians proudly claimed their convict origins.

I look to the day when most Australians will proudly say they are friends with an asylum seeker or a refugee. They are not a problem to be scapegoated, they are brothers and sisters in need. They are family. We move forward together, or we slowly die.

To quote the great American prophet and civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, 'Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter'.

We gather and speak for those with a muted voice. In 2017 Government eligibility criteria reduced financial support and benefits to asylum seekers such that many could not work and their future was uncertain.

We gather today as we believe that good law does not leave you betwixt and between. Good law affords you status and standing in a timely manner. It does not consign you to an interminable limbo.

As many of our forebears awaited their ticket of leave, so today many await the permanent status to get on with their lives. Across Australia they number in their thousands, here in Canberra hundreds.

On a television documentary, I heard a man say he was nervous and quicktempered. He wanted to be reunited with his family. He said the hardest thing was not knowing when his current situation would end. He was not an asylum seeker in Canberra but a Russian soldier on the front line in Ukraine. Yet his hopes and fears would be that of many seeking permanent visas. We are not made to live in fear and uncertainty.

I was privileged to attend the ACT Legislative Assembly launch of the framework for the work being undertaken by Companion House. For those who may not know, Companion House is a place engaging all manner of Canberrans in providing assistance to asylum seekers. What did the late Canadian singer songwriter Leonard Cohen say about in everything there is a crack and that is how the light gets in? The consciences of Canberrans

have been stirred and health, counselling, trauma support, practical advice, educational and social supports are offered to those longing for a place to call home.

I was struck by the title, 'Companion House'. The word 'companion' means 'to share bread' or to offer hospitality. In the darkness of those in our community who are denied what you and me take for granted - standing and stability at law - there is a beacon. Hats off to this and other initiatives, and to the ACT Government for their support of asylum seekers which goes beyond that of their federal and state counterparts.

The death of Russian political martyr Alexi Navalny struck a chord in the hearts and minds of many. He put himself out there and suffered the consequences. He was not an observer but a participant in trying to bring about change.

Today we are participants. We exercise our right to protest about our brothers and sisters in limbo. But I find myself wondering why are there not more doing so? It has been noted that Australians pull together in the face of natural disasters and are generous for a good cause. Think of the McGrath Foundation's Pink Ribbon Days at the Sydney Test.

Yet the needs of those awaiting permanent visa status are met with a mixed response not helped by what appear to be inconsistent government policies, to say nothing of partisan point scoring. Why? Might I suggest that the question is not new.

In Luke's Gospel (10:29-37) of the Christian Scriptures, Jesus was asked, "Who is my neighbour?" He then told the parable of the Good Samaritan. Our neighbour is anyone in need, not just my mob, but anyone in need. We need to broaden our horizons. Ignorance and fear are powerful motivators.

Some years back, I recall a banner advertising the Palm Sunday Rally outside the church I ministered at being taken down. I tied it back up. Fear fosters division. To encounter people is to hear stories. To hear the stories of asylum seekers is to ask what would I have done in their circumstance and what would I want now? No more than a 'fair go', surely?

I draw inspiration from the Old Testament prophet Micah. He exhorted us to "Act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Beautiful yet challenging words.

Believe in God or not, we all need one another. At this time many Muslims seek spiritual renewal through Ramadan. Many Christians will celebrate Easter next Sunday. Many profess no belief. Whatever, we move forward together or not at all.

My prayer is for a new life and purpose for those seeking permanent visas.

Thank you.

*Fr John Woods is a priest of the Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn. Born in New Zealand, he has spent most of his life in Canberra. He is the Parish Priest of the Parish of the Transfiguration North Woden. He has held a number of Archdiocesan appointments and is also currently the Vicar for Social Services and Welfare. As a Christian and grateful citizen, he supports initiatives to improve the plight of asylum seekers.*