

Along the track

Dare to Dream

Christmas is on the horizon once again. The supermarkets are telling us that anyway! It comes around much more quickly as you get older! It is a time we look forward to, a time that makes a difference whether we are believers or not. Underneath all the pressure and the haste, Christmas is a time of kindness. Kindness is so much more than being 'nice'. It arises from a genuine concern for others, it describes actions that are generous, helpful, and considerate, often without expecting anything in return.

Christmas offers us an opportunity to reach out, to be generous if not with our money but with our time and our optimism, but sometimes we need to rediscover that. Optimism can be in short supply today, but it can have a ripple effect. Christmas offers a time to reflect on what gives us joy and happiness in our lives and in our families, what we are thankful for. It is a time to reflect on the gift of living in this country, the freedoms we enjoy, the way of life that others risk their lives to enjoy.

We are told often enough that we live in troubled times and that is true. Some of the demonstrations we have seen over these last months show that we cannot take the openness and generosity of our nation for granted. Social researcher Hugh Mackay has been writing about Australia for about sixty years. In his last book, looking back over those years, he posed the rather challenging question, '*Could we become renowned as a loving country, rather than simply a "lucky" one?*' What a revolution that would be!

Mackay wrote that revolutions never start at the top. He wrote: *If we dare to dream of a more loving country - kinder, more compassionate, more cooperative, more respectful, more inclusive, more egalitarian, more harmonious, less cynical - there's only one way to start turning that dream into a reality: each of us must live as if this is already that country. It starts with time we spend with each other and a willingness to listen to each other. That's the great gift, the great therapeutic thing we can do to help transform the family, the workplace, the street, and eventually the nation."*

Australia needs kindness at this time, we do not need division and actions that peddle mistrust and fear of others. We may all have our political differences and where would we be without them, but Christmas is a reminder that building a nation comes from the heart, not from notions that cause division and hatred. If we reflect for a moment of the birth of

Jesus and the message he gave us in word and action, compassion, acceptance and generous love are the words that come to mind. Yes, he did confront hypocrisy and intolerance, he did confront the system that excluded those who were seen as unclean or different, and so should we.

If we dare to dream of a more loving country, beginning with the simple, ordinary things can make an extraordinary difference. I remember being in London just before Christmas some years ago. I watched a group playing steel drums outside Harrods. I kept coming back again and again, it was such a joyful experience (I love buskers anyway) and their music was captivating, even in these freezing conditions. The spectators gave generosity and later on I was taken to a place to hear them again, mostly for homeless people and those doing it tough. They not only brought the joy of their music but what they had collected outside Harrods as well! What brought smiles to the faces of people outside Harrods brought a glimpse of kindness to those who they sat huddled under blankets on a cold night approaching zero. It wasn't a long-term solution but was a reminder that it doesn't take much to make a difference to bring joy and even some hope to another's life, that we can all do something, no matter how insignificant and fleeting it may seem.

Christmas is a time when families get together. We reach out and enjoy each other's company and our blessings. Christmas asks us to give thanks for blessings and to share them as well. Sometimes these times are mixed with losses and hardship. We have only to think of people less fortunate than ourselves, those experiencing loneliness at Christmas, those who have few if any resources, those longing to go home but can't, those who live with violence, to realise how much we have to be grateful for. There is so much that we can take for granted too often.

May Christmas gift you with time to rejoice and give thanks.

And time to listen.

May the birth of Christ again this year renew within you joy, optimism, and courage.

May the message of Christmas encourage us all to vision of a more loving, kinder and inclusive country and the courage to live as if it is not just a dream but a reality.

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au