



**Easter Pastoral Letter from  
Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP**  
to the clergy, religious and  
people of the Archdiocese of  
Sydney on hope and peace in  
a time of insecurity

“Let *your light* shine”  
(Mt 5:16)





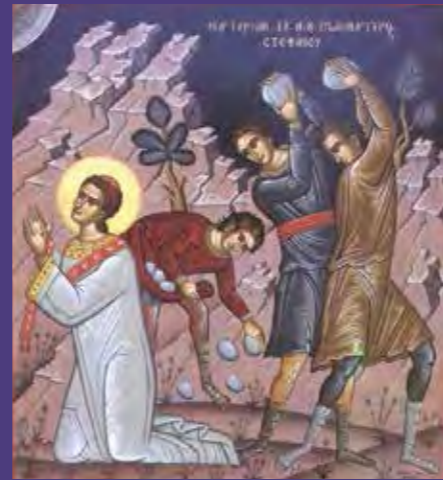
# The gathering gloom

Recently the sixth and last of the *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* films was shown. The author of the tale, J.R.R. Tolkien, filled his story with Christian themes. Against the backdrop of an epic battle between good and evil, we see individual stories of cowardice and courage, virtue and corruption, failure and redemption. The Dark Lord Sauron seeks a magic ring by which to dominate the world; he musters terrible armies and spreads his corruption far and wide. But our hero, Frodo Baggins, receives the ring and the mission to destroy it before it falls into the hands of the evil one and cataclysm envelops the earth.

Every age has its battles between good and evil, and its stories of heroism and tragedy. A hundred years ago this month, young Australian soldiers landed at Gallipoli and within a few months 8,000 of them had died there. Sadly, since that 'war to end all wars' there have been many more battles. Terrorism and religious persecution are also major concerns now. With the rise of the brutal 'Islamic State' movement, governments across the Middle East have been shaken, ancient churches burned, hospitals and refugee camps stretched to breaking point, and streets filled with corpses. The 'cleansing' of Christians from the Middle East continues apace; in Turkey, for instance, it is estimated that 20% of the population were Christians when the ANZACs arrived; after a century of genocide and persecution, they now represent only 0.2%. Persecution of religious minorities is also common in parts of Africa and Asia.<sup>1</sup>

Such suffering brings us back to our Easter origins: Jesus was hounded and executed, and He warned His disciples to expect the same (Mt 5:10-12; Jn 15:18-25; 1Pet 3:14). As early Christians were cruelly persecuted by the Roman empire, the Church father Tertullian wrote that "The Church is awe-struck. This persecution makes her more zealous in informing the faith and better disciplined in practising it, through fasts, gatherings and prayers, in humility, fraternity and love, in holiness and moderation. For in such times there is no room for anything but fear and hope."<sup>2</sup> Two millennia later we recognize that Christians are not alone among the oppressed and have sometimes been the oppressors, but the overwhelming majority of those persecuted for their faith today are Christians.<sup>3</sup>

Nor are Australians exempt from these contemporary struggles. Our own servicemen have been injured or died amongst those trying to contain terrorism. Incredibly, some Australians have joined the ranks of the jihadists. The Martin Place siege, only blocks away from our own cathedral, brought these conflicts very close to home. And as Pope Francis keeps pointing out, there are many other failures of respect in 'throw-away' societies like ours: food is thrown out while millions starve;<sup>4</sup> the young are aborted in their thousands and there is a push to licence killing the elderly too;<sup>5</sup> women, children and surrogate babies are commodified and trafficked;<sup>6</sup> hearts and borders are closed to



St Stephen, the first martyr

those fleeing persecution.<sup>7</sup> As Jesus observed in the *Sermon on the Mount* such violence and neglect begin within us (Mt 5:21-26, 43-48; 7:1-5). The great twentieth century author, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, wrote: "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being".<sup>8</sup> In my first pastoral letter as Archbishop so near the centenary of ANZAC Day I ask: is there no end to bloodshed and despair? Will any war finally end all wars? Can there ever be true peace amongst us?

Cover: *The people of Sydney place flowers of condolence in Martin Place following the Lindt Cafe siege.* Photo courtesy of The Daily Telegraph, News Limited Sydney.



Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP meets with Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohammad, Grand Mufti of Australia coming together to advance interfaith relations.

Australian troops, Dardanelles Campaign, Gallipoli, 1915.

# Easter: hope of the fallen

In Lent, especially, Christians face up to evil in the world and ourselves – and repent. Yet Pope Francis has warned us not to live in a perpetual Lent.<sup>9</sup> Easter is the horizon for the Christian. Easter is the victory of God's love over the forces of evil and it is a reality here and now in the Church, God's Kingdom already come, in embryo among us and awaiting that Easter of all Easters when Christ returns. To assume endlessly angry or grim postures and turn on those who differ from us ethnically or religiously, is to lose sight of Easter.

Easter says: whatever the gloom in our world or our lives, there is ultimately a greater brightness. There is the greater good that is the living God and no creature of fact or fantasy can match Him. There is the universe that He has entrusted to us, with all its beauty and opportunity. There are the gifts of human life, intellect, love and freedom. There are great human achievements down through the centuries, noble choices made every day, acts of generosity or heroism often unseen. And there is the victorious grace of Easter effected in the ongoing work of Christ in His Church, redeeming the world and making sinners into saints.

Christ is the *Light of the world* – a light Easter attests could not be overcome by the Darkness (Jn 1:5,9; 1Jn 2:8-11; 3:8). He is the *Resurrection and the Life* – a life Easter confirms Death cannot conquer (Jn ch 11; 14:6). He is our *Hope* – a hope that sustains us when all seems lost (Acts 23:6; Rom 8:24-5; Col 1:27; 1Tim 1:1). Easter reveals that divine Love conquers all.

Amidst 'the encircling gloom' of political instability, economic insecurity, terrorist atrocities and our personal tragedies – our own Triduum – a fire is struck and the Resurrection told in the lighting of a new Easter Candle. Then the deacon sings the *Exultet*: "Exult, let them exult, hosts of heaven... Let all corners of the earth be glad, knowing an end to gloom and darkness... Let Mother Church also rejoice, arrayed with the lightning of Christ's glory..." Easter is the promise of dawn beyond every darkness. And from the Paschal candle our own lamps are lit, that Christ's light may shine out for all to see (Mt 5:14-6, 21-6, 38-48).

As Anzac Day marks the centenary of the Gallipoli landing, Christians are singing their *Exultet* of 'the happy fault' of one young man's death – a death that gives hope to all the fallen. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we remember them; but more importantly, *God remembers them and so they will rise again.* We dare say with St Paul: "O Death, where is your victory?" (1Cor 15:54) With the exultant Church we sing that Easter "dispels wickedness, washes faults away, restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to mourners, drives out hatred, fosters concord, and brings down the mighty."

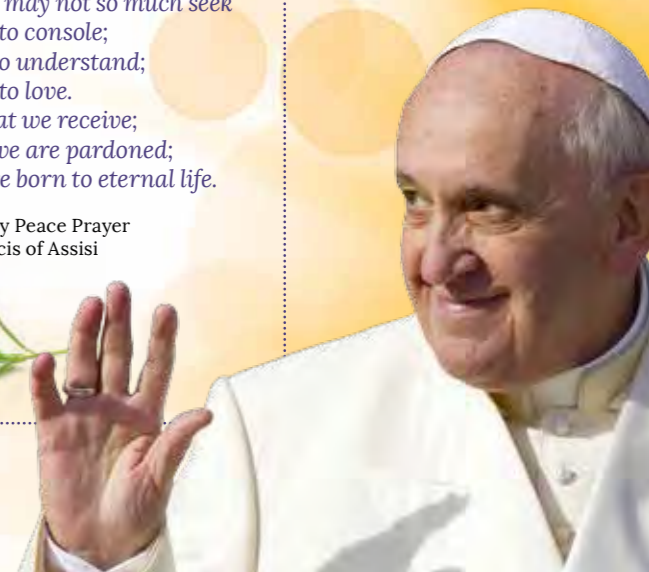


The Resurrection of Christ by Paolo Veronese, c.1570

Christ goes down into the tomb, even into the graves of those who died at Gallipoli, to announce: "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world!" (Jn 16:33) Christ rises from the tomb and as our Easter Gospels record His first words to the newborn Church are: *Shalom, Peace be with you!* (Jn 20:19-31; Lk 24:35-48).

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is discord, harmony;  
where there is error, truth;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Early twentieth century Peace Prayer  
inspired by St Francis of Assisi





# Living Easter lives

In colonial Sydney a devout Catholic convert, wife and mother of six, Caroline Chisholm, saw poor women and children being 'trafficked' or driven into prostitution and delinquency. She never lost hope for them. Instead she devoted herself to ensuring that the most desperate were sheltered, employed, given land or credit. She tirelessly lobbied governments and influenced people such as Charles Dickens and Florence Nightingale.<sup>10</sup> We might rightly pray that this champion of Catholic social teaching in action will one day be recognized as an Australian saint alongside St Mary MacKillop and others.



Caroline Chisholm is a woman who took Easter seriously! Like Nightingale she knew exactly what Pope Francis means when he describes the Church as a 'field hospital' for the physically, emotionally and spiritually wounded.<sup>11</sup> Thousands of Australian Catholics since her have also been determined to make our Church a place of refuge and healing. The Church in Australia now has around 10,000 hospital beds, 20,000 aged care places, 700,000 school desks, and assists countless people through parishes, CatholicCare and the St Vincent de Paul Society. 5½ million Catholics, in 1300 parishes and every walk of life, contribute in myriad ways to our nation. Much has been achieved: much is still to be done!

Pope Francis exhorts us to be zealous for justice and peace. With missionary joy we must leave our comfort zones and go to the 'peripheries' where Gospel light is most needed (cf. Mt 5:15-6).<sup>13</sup> These will not be in some distant land, but often in our own streets, workplaces, homes: anywhere where people are thrown away, lonely, anxious, despairing.

Of course, we can't give what we don't have. Before we can offer others communion with God and the Church, we must ourselves be truly in communion, living that faith, hope and charity proclaimed by the Word and nourished by the Sacraments. This is why the Church requires Catholics to fulfil their 'Easter duties'

of confessing their grave sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and receiving Holy Communion at least annually during the Paschal Season.<sup>14</sup> *Annually* is of course a *minimum*: the twin sacraments of Reconciliation and Communion offer a life-long process of conversion – a long course of heart therapy rather than a one-off shock from a spiritual defibrillator. As we get into a good rhythm of hearing the Word and receiving the sacraments we seek to cultivate the habits of heart of the peacemaker: reverence, patience, forgiveness, perseverance, friendship.

## Conclusion

The *Lord of the Rings* epic is, in many ways, an Easter story. Against the backdrop of the battle between light and darkness, three characters are tested and emerge as 'saints': a king, Aragorn, the noblest of men, who inspires others to join him in pursuit of justice and peace; a priest, Gandalf, who 'dies' so that evil "shall not pass" and rises so supernatural power might be put to the service of humanity; and a victim, Frodo, who heroically resists corruption and goes, like a lamb to the slaughter, in fulfilment of his mission to save the world. All three are Christ-like figures... for in Him the story of every person is recapitulated, purified and transfigured; in Him is held out the hope that our stories may end gloriously too.

I pray that the peace won at the first Easter will fill our hearts and our land. May the clergy, religious and faithful of Sydney be those missionary disciples Pope Francis is calling us to be. May we be beacons of faith, hope and love, like Jesus Christ who was "kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom".<sup>15</sup>

Peace be with you!

*Anthony Fisher, OP*

Archbishop of Sydney



*Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom;  
Lead thou me on!*

*The night is dark, and I am far from home;  
Lead thou me on!*

*Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see  
The distant scene—one step enough for me.*

*I was not ever thus, nor pray'd that thou  
Shouldst lead me on.*

*I loved to choose and see my path; but now,  
Lead thou me on!*

*I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,  
Pride ruled my will. Remember not past years.*

*So long thy pow'r hath blest me, sure it still  
Will lead me on*

*O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till  
The night is gone.*

*And with the morn those angel faces smile,  
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile!*

~ Bld John Henry Newman, 1833



1. Aid to the Church in Need, *Religious Freedom in the World* – 2014, p. 7. According to the Pew Research Center, over 75% of the world's population lives in areas with severe religious restrictions and a third of countries have a high or very high level of social hostilities involving religion: [www.pewresearch.org/](http://www.pewresearch.org/). 2. Tertullian, *De Fuga in Persecutione* 1. See also *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs and Martyrdom of Polycarp*. 3. John Allen, *The Global War on Christians* (2013); Caroline Wyatt, "Growing religious persecution a threat to everyone," *BBC News World* 14 November 2014. 4. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (EG) 53; *Address to the European Parliament*, 25 November 2014; *New Encyclical...* 5. Pope Francis, EG 213-4; *Address to the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations*, 20 September 2013; *Address to the Italian Catholic Physicians Association* 15 November 2014. 6. Pope Francis, *Address to Diplomats*, 12 Dec 2013; *Address to an International Congress on Human Trafficking*, 10 Apr 2014; *Message for the World Day of Peace*, 1 Jan 2015. 7. Pope Francis, *Messages for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 5 Aug 2013 and 3 Sep 2014. 8. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Part I, chapter 4. 9. Pope Francis, EG 6. 10. There are biographies of Chisholm by Joanna Bogle, Judith Iltis, Margaret Kiddle and Rodney Stinson. 11. 'A Big Heart Open to God: Interview of Pope Francis with Antonio Spadaro SJ', *America*, 30 Sep 2013. 12. Pope Francis, EG 201. Cf. Vatican Council II, GS 45. 13. Pope Francis, EG 20-21. 14. CIC 920 and 989. 15. Bld John Henry Newman, *Lead Kindly Light* (1833).