

CHRISTMAS 2016.

CONNECTING THE DOTS.

There's a simple game you often find on the children's pages of weekend papers and magazines that's called "connecting the dots". If you enter into the game at this time of the year you will probably finish up with a picture of Santa in his sleigh, or disappearing down a chimney with the sack filled with toys on his back.

Last night, in the Domain's Myer Music Bowl, a similar game of joining the dots went on, a musical game of joining the dots, as people joined in a wide selection of Christmas carols and other songs, but I wonder how many people of the thousands who were there were really be able to join the dots, as they were distracted by Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, Jingle Bells, or Santa never made it into Darwin.

It's so easy to miss the really important bits, when we concentrate, for example, on the sentimental bits, like: "Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head", and don't see the connection with "Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinner reconciled, Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate Deity, pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel."

We hear words like 'Saviour' and 'Redeeming Grace', but what about 'this World of Sin', or in '*We three Kings of Orient are*', "Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom, sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in a cold-stone tomb", while in the next verse it sings of: "Glorious now, behold him rise, King and God and Sacrifice, Heaven signs 'Alleluia', 'Alleluia' earth replies."

Christmas is more than celebrating a Baby's birth or, as it would appear for many people, simply having a holiday. Christmas is asking us to recognise why this Baby was born, and what we were meant to learn from the life he lived, and the death he endured.

Again and again our Carols speak about a 'world of sin', about 'mercy and redeeming grace', about a 'Saviour' and 'God and sinner reconciled', and those are the dots that need to be connected to make this celebration meaningful.

Anyone who reads the newspapers or watches the news on TV will recognise the world of sin we live in, a world of selfishness and self-concern only, where lust and greed and a hunger for power appear to be the main forces driving people's lives, a world where peace is difficult to find, and where an all-round positive working together appears to be fantasy.

That's the world as we know it, and the world in which the Christ-child was born, - the world that Christ-child was committed to change. And change it did, - except not quite in the way we expected him to, and we still struggle with the delusion that he said farewell to, - the delusion of power.

I'd like you to listen to a passage written by Thomas Merton, a journalist, as he prepared to join the Catholic Church: "It is only the mercy of God that has prevented us from tearing ourselves to pieces and destroying his entire creation long ago. People seem to think that the fact we have so many wars are proof that no loving and merciful God exists. On the contrary, consider how in spite of centuries of sin and greed and lust and cruelty and hatred and avarice and injustice, spawned and bred by the free wills of men, the human race can still recover each time, and can produce men and women who overcome evil with good, hatred with love, greed with charity, lust and cruelty with sanctity. How could all this be possible without the merciful love of God, pouring out his grace upon us? Can there be any doubt where wars come from, and where peace comes from, - when the children of this world, excluding God from their peace conferences only manage to bring about greater and greater wars the more they talk about peace?"

We only have to open our eyes and look about us to see what our sins are doing to the world, and have done. But we cannot see. We are the ones to whom it was said by the prophets of old: "Hearing they hear, but fail to understand; and seeing the vision, they see but fail to take hold of it."

Christmas presents us with the greatest love story ever told, - of the God who become one of us, to show us through his love how we could live positively and constructively together, by caring for each other in the way that Jesus did. To save us from ourselves, God had two options: He could destroy sin by taking away our free will, but that would also destroy our ability to love and the possibility of consciously enjoying life, - or he could restore us to grace, leaving our free will intact, and appeal to what is best in us, so that together with Him, we would create a new world where care for each other and love would prevail, - and that is what he has brought us in Christ: Forgiveness of sin, and the freedom to love as Christ did.

They are the dots we need to join together, and to help us in this, God gave us the Church and the Sacraments, especially the Mass and the Eucharist, so that strengthened by Christ's Body and Blood we might walk in the footsteps of Christ, and bring his self-giving love and peace to a world that's very much in need of it.

Let's celebrate a meaningful Christmas by knowing where we are going, with all the dots in place.