

Mon, 14th September 2009

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION ADDRESS TO THE POVERTY & JUSTICE BIBLE LAUNCH - PARLIAMENT HOUSE

The Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP Leader of the Opposition

E&OE

Reverend Tim Costello, Prime Minister, members of the Bible Society and Voices of Justice, Members and Senators. On behalf of the Opposition, can I congratulate each and every one of you for your dedication and your commitment to speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves. I hope you have found the last two days of the Voices for Justice gathering here in Canberra inspiring and that the next two days are going to be equally inspiring and stimulating. Now since coming into Parliament in 2004 I have met with many organisations – many of them represented here today – who are doing tremendous work both here in Australia and on the international stage. I have met with many youth-based organisations, more recently the Oaktree Foundation and the United Nations Youth Association, and every single one of these is made up of passionate, caring and highly-motivated individuals.

But I come to you today with a slightly different approach. My challenge is directed to all Australians: that if you believe strongly in justice, then you should act to alleviate poverty and suffering, give something of yourself to others. You can donate, you can give money and we should all do that when we can, and of course there are various ways to do this, but it is also important to support the work of organisations who are on the ground, working in poor communities to give them food, water, skills for life, but also hope.

And on the subject of water, and having regard to the fact that we have in the room the current Water Minister Penny Wong and the last Water Minister which is me, I thought I might take advantage of this beautiful Bible that you have given me – and I thank you for that sincerely – and just talk a little bit about the challenge of providing fresh water to the world's poor.

Access to fresh water is becoming more and more of a challenge all around the world, due not simply to the depletion of existing water resources, particularly groundwater resources, where the implications for agriculture and the ability of a number of developing countries to feed themselves are truly alarming, but also, of course, because of pollution. And it is interesting that in the Bible water is a constant metaphor. Of course, that is how we are baptised as Christians in water, literally. But as a dry country the idea of water, its unpredictability and its importance occurs throughout the Bible, so I was pleased to see that you have highlighted in Isaiah 41, verse 17, this passage:

When the poor and needy
are dying of thirst
and cannot find water,
I, the Lord God of Israel,
will come to their rescue.
I won't forget them.
I will make rivers flow
on mountain peaks.
I will send streams
to fill the valleys.
Dry and barren land
will flow with springs
and become a lake.

So you can see there that Isaiah is indicating how God's love is demonstrated by the bringing of water and there is another passage which is actually not highlighted but it is one of my favourite passages in Psalm 126, verse 4 where the psalmist says: "Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the streams in the Negev". The translation here is "like streams in the Southern Desert", which means the same thing. But the point there of course is that in desert country when it rains the streams are filled instantly and there is a rush of water. Some of you may have been to the Herodian, the ancient Jewish fortress of Masada, which is a fortress built on a hilltop in the desert where the Jewish people fought a truly desperate battle at the end against the Romans; a heroic battle which is why it is so celebrated in Jewish history. But what is interesting about that, from a water point of view about that fortress, is that even though there was only about half an inch of rainfall a year, there were 70,000 cubic metres of cisterns in the middle of the fortress, carved into the rock and a most elaborate system of dams and channels and canals so that when it did rain on that one day a year not a drop was wasted – a great reminder of the importance of water management and I guess the timelessness of the commitment of the Jewish people to using water well. For as Benjamin Franklin wisely observed, we will not know the value of water until the well is dry. Now in the New Testament we are told in Corinthians of faith, hope and love but the greatest of these is love, and that is so true. Both Lucy and I believe very firmly in and practice love to all we can. We believe passionately in the importance of philanthropy, loving other people, of giving and it is important that, as the Prime Minister said, to understand that governments cannot do everything and they should not because when a government collects taxes and makes payments to overseas aid or any other useful purpose, philanthropic purpose if you like, it provides enormous assistance. But when an individual, when one of us makes a contribution be it in dollars or in time, that contribution carries with it a direct message of love and personal commitment. And so it is absolutely important to support and enhance the action of individuals. Now part of your job and our job is to shine a light on the problems of poverty and the need for more assistance to the world's poorest and most underprivileged who face

considerable challenges, growing challenges from the threat of climate change in particular. Now I have recently met with Tim Costello, who is a good friend. We had a long chat with his team about, on that occasion, the need to support efforts to help rebuild the nation of Afghanistan, and can I just acknowledge the leadership he has shown and the work he is doing to support Australia's efforts in that country. The efforts to rebuild and secure Afghanistan is one of the world's most difficult and dangerous struggles, not just for our troops on the ground but also for the aid workers who face the same challenges, the same very dangerous challenges of booby traps and improvised explosive devices. Now it will need a great deal of determination and dedication if we are to succeed, but the good will is there internationally and many good Australians are making great sacrifices to help get that country back on its feet.

But we also need the political leadership of Afghanistan, of course, to step up to their responsibilities and we support them in doing so. This challenge that you have set all of us here in this House is a massive one. But it is one, as you remind us in this Bible, that is as ancient as this book. For as long as men and women have understood God's will, they have understood the importance of loving each other, they have understood the importance of charity, they have understood the importance of helping those who are less well off than themselves. The concept of charity, "tzedakah" in the Hebrew, is fundamental to the Jewish faith, which of course is fundamental to this book.

So I thank you very much for presenting me with this Bible. I think it is a much better approach than that of Thomas Jefferson – seems to me to be of dubious literary value. This is a great piece of work and it will, I think, enable those of us who peruse this Bible, as we page through it our eyes will be drawn to the orange highlighted passages and be reminded above all of the importance of love.

Thank you very much.