

## **Exploring Iraq Today**

**19<sup>th</sup> November 2014**

**Cathedral Room**

**Cardinal Knox Centre**

**Welcome by Very Rev. Denis Stanley**

On behalf of the archdiocesan Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission, greetings and welcome to this evening's gathering to explore the current situation in Iraq, especially its Christian communities - to explore a little of its history to understand its present, and find ourselves more informed and more sensitive to our brothers and sisters in that place and its impact on our life here in Australia as multi-faith community.

One of the most dangerously convenient gadgets that human beings have ever invented is the tv remote control. When anything you don't like or can't be bothered with appears on the tv screen, it's one simple click and we move on, until we find something we like. Click, click, click - it's easy to avoid the ugly, the brutal or violent and therefore to turn a blind eye not simply to the suffering of our fellow human beings, but also to our need to struggle with the injustices and the complexities that cause that suffering. A simple click can painlessly remove us from all that and we find ourselves comforted by Master Chef or Better Homes and Gardens. It's easier than you think to fall into or compromise with what Pope Francis calls, "the globalization of indifference" - a very sobering phrase.

This evening none of us, I hope, have brought our tv remotes. This evening is a moment to stay with an issue long enough to ponder, to learn, to be informed and so be made a little more ready to pray intelligently and feelingly, to be enlightened and to enlighten others, to get conversations started and find ways to stand in solidarity with the peoples of Iraq and Syria who are part of that complex and troubled patchwork of the Middle East and to deal with the impact of those events here in Australia.

In September last, our Archbishop, acting as the President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, managed to get a letter published in the Australian. The opening paragraph of his letter dealt with something we often feel when we care to be touched and ponder the ongoing events in the middle east. He writes,

"We can feel so remote from the conflict it is hard to know how to help. But, he says, we can act in our own country to promote peace" - and I might add, promote understanding and solidarity with the many Christians from the Middle East who live among us as well as the Muslim community. The archbishop's letter, in fact, draws attention to the awkward and distressing situation of the Muslim community in Australia:

"The burden of suspicion has fallen on the minority Muslim community in Australia because of the actions of extremists. That is not fair, and we should not allow that to continue..."

Again he stresses what our job must be, our job as Australians is to build and strengthen relationships in local communities. The challenge for Australians is how to relate to each other on a personal level. Do we replicate the divisions and threats overseas, or do we respond differently?

Our gathering, I trust, this evening is a small contribution to this job of building and strengthening relationships not only with the Muslim community in Australia, but also as Christians to build and strengthen relationships with those ancient Christian communities of Iraq and Syria whose stories we need to know better.

The archbishop's letter commends our government's "humanitarian efforts on behalf of the people of northern Iraq" and even, he writes, "I support limited and measured military assistance from Australia to defend the people of Northern Iraq" although he notes that "military solutions do not bring lasting peace."

These comments reveal the some of the political responses that have been taken up and have entered into the ongoing controversy of the moment. Perhaps they are points we can dialogue with our government about, as many have done. A Christian's actions and concerns are centred on the Kingdom of God, a kingdom that always wants to move us beyond the woundedness and brokenness and the sin of the world, and the sometimes less than perfect response of governments, to keep our eyes unflaggingly focused on the good.

"Don't let the terrorists change our open hearts to suspicion and fear," the Archbishop's letter concludes.