
Bishop Paul Bird's Homily on the Commissioning of World Youth Day Pilgrims St Patrick's Cathedral, Ballarat – 16th June 2013

Overlooking the city of Rio de Janeiro there is a famous statue of Christ the Redeemer. Christ is standing with his arms open wide. The statue is thirty metres tall and the arms are twenty-eight metres wide. It is on the peak of the seven hundred metre high Corcovado mountain, so you can see the statue from all around the city. I had the opportunity to take a close look at the statue when I was in Brazil twenty years ago. What struck me most of all was how the statue presented Christ as open and welcoming. When you are up close to the statue, you can appreciate that it is very large. Yet it did not seem overpowering. On the contrary, it seemed almost homely, like a little statue of Christ you might have on a shelf at home.



The statue presents Christ as a graceful figure, with simple flowing robes. His arms are stretched out in a gesture of welcome. His face is calm and peaceful. On his chest is a symbol of a heart. It is a figure of a graceful, peaceful, loving Christ, ready to welcome all who come to him.

That figure of a graceful and loving Christ is in tune with the message in the Scriptures for this Mass. In the readings this evening, we heard of the grace and love that God shows us, even when we have sinned. We have two examples of God's forgiveness. In the story from the book of Samuel, King David confesses that he has done wrong. He says, "I have sinned against the Lord." Then the prophet Nathan says to David, "The Lord, for his part, forgives your sin." In the gospel, a woman shows that she is sorry for the wrong that she has done and Jesus says to her: "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace."

The figure of Christ in the Scriptures this evening is like the figure of Christ overlooking Rio, someone who is rich in mercy and ready to welcome all who come to him.

In a few weeks time, young people from around the world will converge on Rio de Janeiro for World Youth Day 2013. They will be there to celebrate their faith in Christ. They will see the statue of Christ the Redeemer and I hope that statue will be a sign to them that Christ himself is with them. Jesus has promised that where even two or three gather in his name, he will be there in their midst. In Rio for World Youth Day, there will certainly be two or three and many more. There will be a vast crowd of young people from countries all around the world. They will speak many different languages but they will be drawn together because of their faith in Christ. I pray that they will have a keen sense that Christ himself is with them.

Among that vast crowd will be twenty-two pilgrims from our Diocese of Ballarat. At the conclusion of our Mass this evening, we will commission them for their journey to South America. On their way, some will visit Catholic communities in Chile. Some will visit Catholic communities in Peru. Then they will all meet up in Rio for the World Youth Day celebrations there, culminating in Mass with Pope Francis on July 28.

The journey to World Youth Day will be a pilgrimage of faith. I pray that our pilgrims from the Ballarat diocese will be enriched in their faith in Christ. When they arrive in Rio, they will see the welcoming statue of Christ the Redeemer overlooking the city. With the eyes of faith may they also see that Christ himself is there to welcome them – the graceful, peaceful, loving Christ. He is always ready to welcome us. May we come to him with confidence.

Bishop Paul Bird CSSR