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Easter promises hope and renewal amid COVID-19

EDITORIAL



By **THE AUSTRALIAN EDITORIAL**,
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Like much of the world, the Via Dolorosa in the Old City of Jerusalem — the route Jesus walked to his death, carrying the cross — was eerily silent on Good Friday. Easter and the Jewish Passover coincide this year, but the commemorations and celebrations, overshadowed by COVID-19, are confined and muted. But rarely have the sacrifices and salvation at the centre of both religious traditions resonated so powerfully. “Dare we hope in a world that is suffering?” Sydney’s Catholic Archbishop Anthony Fisher asked in his Easter message. “It can seem impossible, even insensitive, to talk of hope when people are sick or dying, anxious or isolated, unemployed or otherwise burdened.” But after Calvary on Good Friday comes Easter, after the tomb the resurrection and new life. Like many of us, Archbishop Fisher cannot visit his parents for Easter — their nursing home is locked down. One of his Dominican colleagues in England, with whom he once shared a house, died of COVID-19 this week.

At the start of an Easter break like no other that Australians have experienced, a beam of hope emerged on Friday. Australia is “on the cusp” of defeating the coronavirus pandemic, Deputy Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly says, with the range of people infected by one COVID-19 patient getting lower and lower. The news that Australia is not at the danger rate of infection — an average of five people infected by one direct source — suggests the epidemic could die out in several weeks at the earliest. It could be several months. But it is still too early, Dr Kelly says, to lift social-distancing restrictions. To the contrary, it is adherence to those restrictions, imposed earlier than in many parts of the world, that has saved lives in Australia and positioned the nation to come through the pandemic as well as possible.

The Easter weekend is shaping as a turning point. It was regrettable, NSW Police Commissioner Mick Fuller said on Friday, that 50 “covidiot” in 24 hours had to be issued with personal infringement fines of \$1000 for ignoring public health orders in the state. It is even more regrettable that a new \$5000 fine for those who spit or cough on emergency service workers is necessary. Nurses, doctors, paramedics and others routinely work through long weekends. This year they are risking their health and that of their families to do so. With 1.6 million cases worldwide, almost 100,000 deaths and 6203 cases in Australia and 53 deaths, there is no room for complacency. To ignore advice by crowding into parks or on to beaches, walking too close to others in supermarkets or on footpaths is to risk a spike in caseloads in a fortnight. Undoing much of the good work done to date would be dangerous and potentially deadly folly.

Australians of faith, as Scott Morrison said in his Easter message — filmed beside a striking image of a 6th-century icon of Christ — will live out their beliefs over the long weekend by doing the right thing. That includes staying home, checking on neighbours and supporting communities, families and friends — at a safe distance. The Prime Minister’s sensible concession to allow complex Easter religious services with their cantors, readers, servers and rich imagery, to go ahead in churches, while observing social distancing and without congregations, is a comfort to countless thousands following those liturgies via streaming. As Archbishop Fisher said after Stations of the Cross in St Mary’s Cathedral on Friday, “the way we’ve just walked with Christ was a very lonely one”. Social distancing, the archbishop hoped, meant “physical distancing and not distancing ourselves socially or spiritually”. Faith groups in Australia have been disciplined in adhering to government restrictions. From April 23, Muslims will experience Ramadan under the restrictions.

Aside from faith, the long weekend is normally the last chance for a good beach break before winter. Lots of us are missing the surf and sand, just as tourism operators and hospitality staff are missing the crowds. To add to families’ woes, some supermarkets had run out of Easter eggs by Thursday. In coping with job losses and business shutdowns, the JobKeeper package and other measures are more than a financial boost. They are also a psychological boost and a bridge to the recovery phase. Hasten the day.

Nor should it be forgotten that many are still struggling in the aftermath of bushfires, floods

and drought. In her Easter message, filmed on Kangaroo Island before the pandemic was declared, the president of the Uniting Church, Deidre Palmer, said: “In these times of crisis and trauma, we stand with each other, journeying and struggling together through the long road ahead.” Christians, she said, believed Jesus “comes alongside us in our suffering, and offers comfort, love and healing”. Asked whether COVID-19 had killed Easter this year Sydney’s Anglican Archbishop Glenn Davies answered with a “resounding no”. Amid unemployment, loneliness, and fears for the safety of loved ones, the greatest fear from the virus, he said, was the fear of death. The lessons of Easter, and of Passover suggest that death and despair do not have the last words. Restoration and regeneration lie ahead, albeit at a cost. In these extraordinary times, The Weekend Australian wishes readers a healthy and peaceful break.