

Remarks at St Mark Coptic Orthodox Church

PRIME MINISTER:

Thank you so much. Your Graces, Bishop Daniel and Paula. Reverend fathers and members of the congregation. Thank you so much for inviting Lucy and me to attend your mass this morning in this beautiful church.

We're here together in this Coptic church, nearly 2,000 years of continuity to the time when the apostle Mark – who of course was born just to the west of Egypt in Cyrene – returned to Egypt and founded the church in Egypt, the Coptic Church.

Mark's gospel begins with a passage from Isaiah, which prophesied the coming of John the Baptist. But I wonder whether the apostle, when he wrote his gospel, was he thinking also of another passage of Isaiah which foretold the coming of the church and the message of the Lord and the altar of the Lord, being established in the land of Egypt.

Surely nearly two millennia of history, an unbroken chain of Popes of the Coptic Church in Alexandria, that unbroken chain, says something very powerful. In the face of so much persecution and so much adversity, it says something very powerful not simply about the spirit and the indomitability of the Coptic people, but of the power of the Holy Spirit, reaching across all those years, maintaining your faith and that of your fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers before you over all that time, in the Word of the Lord.

So thank you so much for inviting us here today. I am, as you know, joined with Lucy of course and we are delighted to be here with you. With our colleagues, our parliamentary colleagues Alex Hawke, who has come with his wife Amelia and his children Jack and Lachlan. We are after all, the Party of family values. We have lots of babies in the Coalition at the moment so we're practicing what we preach. And of course, the babies of the next generation. Lucy and I are now at the grandparent stage of our lives. But it's wonderful also to be joined by Craig Laundy and David Coleman and Craig Kelly. John thank you very much for your generous appreciation and work with the Government. In particular, the work of immigration and I'll pass on to Peter Dutton the kind words you had about him.

Let me say to you my friends, that we in Australia are the most successful multicultural society in the world. We are.

And you could not imagine modern Australia in all its diversity and magnificence, without you. What you have done, what your families have done, the commitment you've made – respecting our values, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, mutual respect – there is the foundation. That mutual respect is the foundation of the harmony we enjoy in Australia, in a world where

regrettably, as we see, particularly in the Middle East where there is so little harmony and so much intolerance.

One of the greatest tragedies of our times has been the persecution of Christians right through the Middle East. It is a devastating tragedy to see the persecution of Churches that were founded by the apostles, by men who knew Jesus, men who had walked with Jesus, worked with Jesus. His apostles foundations, these Churches, the most ancient in the world, as Bishop Daniel described, these have been threatened. And I am delighted to hear from Bishop Paula, how strongly President el-Sisi is standing up to defend the Coptics and standing up for the unity of Egypt, defying the Islamist scourge that is seeking to destroy Christianity in the Middle East. But also, is a disease within Islam itself.

We mustn't mince words here. We have to be very clear-eyed about this. As President el-Sisi and I have discussed this matter directly – and I'll come to your requests in a moment your Grace, your Grace – I've discussed these matters with President el-Sisi and he has called it out for what it is. These terrorists, these people are blasphemers and heretics. They seek to destroy their own religion as they seek to destroy others.

They must be resisted, defied and destroyed. That is my commitment and the commitment of my Government. My friends, we stand with you to defy the terrorists.

You know, you have within your own history and the experience of many of you, all of your families, you have a reminder of how important mutual respect and multiculturalism is. In every respect. The most successful cities in the Mediterranean – Alexandria, Istanbul, Constantinople, Smyrna of course – were all cities that at their height, when they were greatest, were thoroughly multicultural. Diversity brings strength. A diverse society, a multicultural society, is a powerful society, because all of us are enriched by the experience, by the insight, by the culture of everybody else. That is the genius of a successful multicultural society. So much of that has been lost in Egypt. So much of that has been lost especially in other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean.

So what we have in Australia is precious. We can never be complacent about it. We live in a world where you see communities that have lived together with relative harmony for hundreds of years, that apparently no longer can do so. It is extraordinary in the 21st century, you would have to say that looking across the whole world, there is less tolerance than there was before. You would think with all of our sophisticated scientific advancement, we could have also made more progress in terms of our social interactions.

But Australia is different. We are stronger because we are diverse. We are stronger because we maintain that mutual respect. That is why we make no apologies for reinforcing the fundamental values of Australia and of Australian citizenship.

We say that what we have done here is something of which we can all be proud.

We say what we have created here is a remarkable nation.

We say it is founded on Australian values which are right. They are good. They are eternal. They are strong and they are fundamentally committed to freedom, the rule of the law, democracy, mutual respect, the equality of men and women.

We all believe in that, and we say those who seek to come here and to be citizens in our country, should subscribe to those values as well. Because they're ours and they're right. That is our commitment.

Now as we have heard, we've heard today, and it is a sad tale, over the past six months, these Islamist terrorists in Egypt have targeted your community. Late last year Islamic State in Egypt claimed responsibility for the attack on St Mark Coptic Cathedral in Cairo. 27 worshippers were killed. Earlier this year, they drove 250 Coptics from north Sinai after ISIL threatened to kill them. In April as the Bishop described, ISIL attacked his church, your Grace's church in Tanta and another in Alexandria, killing over 50 people. Of course, on the 26th of May, the ISIL terrorists attacked a convoy of Coptic Christians travelling to the monastery of Saint Samuel in Minya, killing nearly 30. Now I have written to his Holiness, Pope Tawadros II and offered the condolences of the Australian people, reaffirmed to him as I have to Bishop Daniel and I do again today, to this community, that Australia is united with the Coptic Christian community and all Egyptians and the President el-Sisi in the fight against these Islamist terrorists. They must be stopped.

Now I want to touch on the requests from the Bishop. As you know, I'm very attentive to requests from Bishops. Firstly, I look forward to joining you all during the course of Pope Tawadros' visit to Australia later this year.

As you know the numbers are tight in the Federal Parliament so we'll have to make sure that I'm there for votes, but we seem to be winning a few votes in the Parliament at the moment. Well, we win most of them actually, naturally, but often by very tight margins, so all of us have to be there. But we'll certainly look forward to seeing the Pope.

Now as to your second request, it has already been granted!

I had a very good discussion with President Sisi in China recently at an international gathering, the G20 in fact, and we discussed all of these issues and many others. I encouraged him, invited him to come to Australia and he's encouraged me to visit Egypt as well. So that would be good, if both could be achieved. But certainly we would look forward to President Sisi coming to Australia.

Can I say just on that subject of leadership, ISIL Islamist terrorists – and of course there are other Al-Qaeda ... – but as you know, these are people that the vast majority of Muslims regard as blasphemers. In fact many leading Muslim leaders around the world have said to me: "They're not Muslims at all. They are so vile, they are such terrorists, they're blasphemers." Our best allies in the battle to defeat ISIS are Muslim leaders of courage, who are

prepared to stand up and defy them. To say that Islam is a religion that is compatible with democracy and moderation. That is what President Joko Widodo says in Indonesia. That is what President Sisi says in Egypt. Those leaders, moderate leaders of a moderate tradition, are vital allies in the war to defeat ISIL. Because it threatens, it seeks to destroy Islam, and undermine Islam, at the same time as it seeks to destroy other religions and of course, in particular in the Middle East, in this shocking, terrible tragedy, of the assault on the most ancient Christian churches in the world.

So I'm heartened to hear from Bishop Paula how strongly he your community sir, your Grace, is working with the President, with the government of Egypt, the armed forces of Egypt, in solidarity to defeat these terrorists.

Now you've noted the hard work of our ambassador in Egypt and you've thanked Julie Bishop as well for the great work that she and her Department have done. But I want to note, as you know I believe already, that in light of the recent terrorist attacks our Assistant Minister for Immigration and Border Protection Alex Hawke is now reviewing all of the protection applications by Coptic Christians that have been refused on administrative appeal, to ensure that our immigration decisions reflect the current situation in Egypt.

Since 2013, more than 550 protection visas have been granted to Coptic Christians fleeing persecution. We are, as the Bishop acknowledged, working with the Church in Egypt to assist with the victims of the Palm Sunday attacks which occurred earlier in the year.

Now our commitment is to keep Australians safe. That is the first duty of every Government. It is the first duty of my Government. We have been unrelenting in our support for our security and intelligence agencies, in our support for our Australian Defence Force. We have provided them with the legislation that they need to keep us safe.

We've change our laws and we do not take a set and forget approach. I want to assure you of this; yes, our agencies are the best in the world. Yes, our laws are the world's best. In fact many other countries and other leaders are seeking to emulate what we've done. For example we changed the law very recently so that if a person is in jail on a terrorist charge and they're getting to the end of their sentence, and it's clear that they remain a threat to the community, in the sense that they remain an extremist, then they will be kept in jail after the end of their sentence. They will not be let out. This post-sentence detention is a tough law, there's no question about that. But it gives you an indication of the determination we have to keep you and every other Australian safe from terrorism.

We've taken the same approach with parole and bail. You would have seen recently in a meeting with the Premiers, I secured their agreement to there being a presumption against giving parole or bail to anybody who is seeking it who has a connection with, or a history of advocacy for or support for terrorism. We've given the largest single commitment, over \$300 million of additional funding to the Australian Federal Police, to enable them to have the capabilities to keeping us secure in the fight against terrorism.

And of course, we've given our Defence Forces who are fighting in the Middle East, supporting the Coalition forces to destroy ISIL both in Iraq and Syria, the legal means to target terrorists and destroy them, whatever they're doing – whether they're holding a gun, or working in a back office.

So we are absolutely determined to keep you safe.

Now let me say in conclusion, again, thank you for inviting us here today. As John described, I have an interest, I do, I have a great interest in the history of the early Church and particularly in the history of Alexandria. So this is just a joy for me to be here. I'm fascinated with the way in which the Greek alphabet was adapted and expanded a little bit to be used to write the Coptic language. Coptic is – again we talked about nearly 2,000 years of continuity from the visit of Mark to where he established the Church and the Coptic language of course, its continuity, is many thousands of years going right back to the time of the Pharaohs.

So you've blessed us today. Thank you for that your Graces. But this has been a great blessing, a very moving occasion for Lucy and me to be here and our parliamentary colleagues and I should acknowledge Mr Atalla from the state parliament. It's good to be with you sir. Truly, we are the greatest multicultural society in the world. We would not be that great multicultural society without your contribution and that of many other groups who come from different parts of the world, all melding together, integrating, uniting.

Why are we uniting? Because we share the same values. Our values do not discriminate between religion, race, the colour of your skin or ethnicity. They are eternal, universal human values. They are ours. I know that you, and we, all of us, 24 million Australians are united in defending them, defeating the Islamist terrorists that seek to undermine them and defeat us.

We will defeat them.

We will stand with you. We will stand, 24 million Australians, determined forever to be free.

Thank you so much.

[ENDS]