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The cowardly and murderous attacks by Hamas operatives on innocent Jewish people – men, women, children and babies – in northern Israel on October 7, 2023, sowed the bitter seeds of violence, destruction and untold suffering for thousands of people.

The fragile ceasefire offers some hope that the worst of the ­violence might be behind us, but the repercussions from the horrors of October 7 will continue to play out for many years.

Nothing can compare with the torment and suffering of the victims of that terrible attack, including their families and the wider Jewish community. Nor can we minimise the horror of the death and destruction that has unfolded in Gaza.

Pope Francis is right when he says war is always a defeat for humanity. It lays bare the frightening power of evil, which can so easily take hold in people’s minds and hearts, blinding us to our common humanity and leading us to treat others not as our brothers and sisters but as enemies.

Tragically, manifestations of this inexplicable blindness and evil have become visible in our towns and cities. The violent and senseless attitude that goes by the name of anti-Semitism has appeared in various forms.

Our nation, which prides itself on its multicultural ethos and belief in a “fair go for all”, is confronted with the deeply unpalatable truth that for some in our society the notion of tolerance and respect for each other should not include our Jewish brothers and sisters.

It is a cause for shame that places of Jewish worship are being firebombed; that Jewish schools and other institutions are forced to engage security firms; that university students are afraid to be on campus in case they are verbally or physically abused; that Jewish homes and cars are defaced by vile graffiti. And all purportedly in the name of peace and justice, but in reality an expression of that senseless hatred for the Jewish people that, when once it went unchecked in Europe, resulted in the brutal horrors of the Holocaust.

Hatred and the violence it breeds are at different times directed towards different groups in society. This hatred can be racially motivated, religiously motivated or directed towards other groups.

In every case, our acceptance of, or acquiescence in, such bigotry attacks the cohesion of our society and gives the lie to our claim to be the “lucky country” and “the land of the fair go”.

It remains true, however, that there is something particularly pernicious and destructive about anti-Semitism.

Its persistence across so many centuries, its existence in so many countries, its complete irrationality, and its undeniable destructive power laid bare in the Holocaust and reinforced by the deadly attacks of October 7, make it a test case for our determination to be in reality what we claim to be in our mythology: a land and a people of tolerance and respect, of hospitality and embrace of the other.

For the many Australians of Christian faith, it is particularly important we recognise the danger of anti-Semitism and do everything we can to work against it.

Certainly for Catholics, we recall the words of recent popes, including Francis and Benedict, that the Jews are our elder brothers and sisters in the faith. We know, even if some choose to forget or deny it, that Jesus Christ was a Jew, born of a Jewish mother and raised in the Jewish faith and traditions.

His first apostles and many of his early followers were Jews. He called upon the language of the Jewish scriptures in his teaching that God is a merciful Father and that we are called to love our neighbours as ourselves. In his teaching, Jesus insists that everyone is our neighbour. That is the point of his parable of the good ­Samaritan.

When our neighbours are in need, we do our best to come to their aid. Because of the rise of anti-Semitism in Australia today, our Jewish sisters and brothers now have a particular claim on our support and protection.

I invite us all to search our hearts and ask ourselves what we can say and do in our local contexts to reassure the members of the Jewish community they are welcome, respected and safe here in Australia.

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