

Homily of Fr David Ranson
Vicar General of the Diocese of Broken Bay

Australia Day 2026

We often refer to the ‘word of the year’ – a word that encapsulates so much of the tenor and mood of a year that has gone. The word for 2024? “Brain-rot.”¹ Proposed by Oxford University Press, it’s a rather shocking indictment of where we. As the publishing house described, ‘brain rot’ is defined as “the supposed deterioration of a person’s mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as the result of overconsumption of material (now particularly online content) considered to be trivial or unchallenging. Also: something characterized as likely to lead to such deterioration”. Oxford University Press goes on to explain,

The first recorded use of ‘brain rot’ was found in 1854 in Henry David Thoreau’s book *Walden*, which reports his experiences of living a simple lifestyle in the natural world. As part of his conclusions, Thoreau criticizes society’s tendency to devalue complex ideas, or those that can be interpreted in multiple ways, in favour of simple ones, and sees this as indicative of a general decline in mental and intellectual effort: *“While England endeavours to cure the potato rot, will not any endeavour to cure the brain-rot – which prevails so much more widely and fatally?”*

The social effects of this, especially for young people, can only be deeply concerning: the emergence of generations of people whose thinking becomes increasingly manipulated by a media oligarchy for its own purposes. Without wanting to be conspiratorial – and I am not one personally inclined to be so – it is, notwithstanding, difficult not to consider maleficent intentions of rich and powerful people to create social contexts for the purposes of future exploitation of the masses in one form or another, for one purpose or another.

Undoubtedly, the times in which we live are dangerous ones. They are dangerous because they are conflictual. Even current appeals to unity seem to me to be inherently exclusive. It is unity at the expense of diversity, the demand to offer allegiance to one narrative only, to the exclusion of all others. And we see this played out in what have become known in Western society as the culture wars – sharply opposing world views in constant battle with one another for supremacy in which triumph over the other side is the objective. We go ‘into battle’ for our side. We have to prove our position over and against others; defend our position at all costs; rejoice in the victories we consider we score over the competing side with smugness and arrogance. Revenge, retribution become catch-cries. We see this played out on international stages; we see it played out in cliques and factions even in our Church; we see it played out on social media with unrelenting constancy. The result is a situation of winners and losers; domination and submission; the victor and the vanquished – a Promethean treadmill which, in the end, seduces us increasingly away from our humanity.

Our time are fractious. And nowhere do we see this symbolised more acutely than in the horror of anti-Semitism: one minority group of people victimised into fear to give the majority its sense of superiority. Anti-Semitism is always the ‘canary in the mine’. Its eruption in our own city of Sydney over these months is deeply alarming. It impels us to do everything we can to reiterate the bonds of community with our Jewish brothers and sisters which we cannot allow to be extinguished by political and military events played out in the Middle East. Yet, more deeply, it challenges us to reflect on the wider social context with its deeper currents from which such evil emerges. As miners in the shaft, we **must** heed the warning; we must resist the ‘brain-rot’ in which we are enveloped and pursue a strategy of resistance.

¹ “Brain-Rot named Oxford Word of the Year,” <https://corp.oup.com/news/brain-rot-named-oxford-word-of-the-year-2024/>, accessed 26 January 2025.

But how do we galvanise resistance without participating and perpetuating the conflictual environment in which we are immersed?

Violence, and its underlying evil, is never countered by seeking to exercise a greater force. To try to match the force of evil with a greater force is illusory. Evil can only be addressed by refusing to enter its logic, by side-stepping it entirely, and exercising an altogether different power. This is the lesson we are given by Jesus. Ultimately, it is the message of the Cross.

And what is that power? It is the power that, in fact, we know well in Australia – the very power that, In fact, we honour on Australia Day – the power of self-sacrifice, the power of self-giving so that others might live. This is what fascinates me about our Australia Day awards, and the nomination of Australian of the Year. For me, what we do on Australia Day with these accolades offers me one of the greatest sources of hope, and the most positive strategy through the malaise of our time. We do not award those who have triumphed in the competitive struggle, those who have become rich at the expense of the poverty of others, those who have become powerful at the expense of others' weakness. We do not single out those known by the purity of their ideology. We honour those who have served others, who give their lives for the benefit of others. How can we not be deeply moved by the Australian of the Year for 2025: Neil Deniher – once a fabulous AFL sportsman now so reduced by the dreadful disease of Motor Neurone Disease yet who fights daily for those who are also afflicted?² And we think of all the other awardees, including Dr Katrina Wruck, a proud aboriginal woman, Young Australian of the Year, whose research focuses on developing new materials and sustainable methods to address contaminants in water so that she can help combat rheumatic heart disease, a disease that affects many Indigenous Australians in remote communities. And the Senior Australian of the Year, Christian Brother Br Thomas Pickett from Western Australia who has pioneered such a vast voluntary network for the building and construction of wheelchairs for children with disability across the world. Remarkable stories; extraordinary witnesses of the power of the Gospel - whether the recipients are Christian or otherwise - the power that alone can save the world.

That as a nation we would focus on these stories says an enormous amount about our national character as Australians. May we never cease from such attention. I am convinced more than ever that it is one of the most important features of our great nation, the feature about which we should be the proudest.

Step out of the battle about winners and losers; let go of the need to prove how right we are against the other. There is no future in such contests. The stepping stones into that future into which we are invited by the dream of God lay always in the stories of self-emptying become a self-giving, people like Neil Deniher and Thomas Pickett; like people in our own parish community who give of themselves so generously to others.

These people – whether they receive public recognition or remain in the obscurity of anonymity - are the truest living words of each year to us. They are our hope, and therefore they are our future. Their heroism defends us from brain-rot, and offers us the possibility of that truly human world for which Jesus dies and calls us to do the same.

² "Meet the 2025 Australians of the Year," <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/australian-of-the-year-2025-meet-the-winners/ex0f5p3z0>, accessed 26 January 2025.