Mayor’s address at the Civic Commemoration of the February 22 Earthquake

I wish to begin by acknowledging all who have gathered here or who have tuned into the broadcast today to grieve for a loved one who died on the 22 Feb 2011; or who were seriously injured on the day; or were traumatised by what they saw or were called upon to do; or who have experienced loss as a result of the earthquake and in this I include people who lost their home, their neighbourhood, their business, their job.

We have been through a lot as a city and there is still much healing to be done.

This is why I wanted this commemoration to be away from the scenes of devastation that haunt our city. I wanted us to be surrounded by beauty. I wanted to hear the chime of the World Peace Bell, because it is so meaningful in light of what has occurred.

The original World Peace Bell was gifted to the United Nations in 1954 by a Japanese Mayor. Gifted 50 years later to Christchurch, our Peace Bell like the original is cast from the coins of the nations that make up the UN – so it’s sounding today will remind us of all the nationalities who have experienced loss in our city.

There is a piece of pounamu that sits beneath the Peace Bell here that has a matching piece buried beneath the Peace Sculpture in the Nagasaki Peace Park. I believe that today the chiming of this Bell will resonate in Japan.

When a city experiences a traumatic event, people respond and recover in different ways. The gradual realisation that we will never go back to the way things were can be much harder for some than others.

We must be respectful of the reality that not everyone is able to ‘move on’, which has become the phrase we use to describe those who have resolved or at least accepted their situation.

Others cannot ‘move on’ right now for a variety of reasons – for some it is unanswered questions, or the lack of resolution of their claim, for others it is the ongoing impacts of serious injuries, or the disruption to their lives and the loss of a sense of power or control over what has happened.

We must be mindful all the time that there are those who feel the pain of loss and trauma more sharply than others whose experience is not the same as our own.

Sensitivity and empathy will help guide us through this fourth year as we commit to finding the answers to those questions, resolving the outstanding issues and committing to learning the lessons of what has occurred.
When I think back to the day and the weeks that followed the February 22 earthquake, my spirits are always lifted as I recall the way the city came together.

Ordinary people became rescuers on our streets; selfless acts of courage were repeated many times over that day and night; I'm not sure that we know all the stories, but we know that some died heroes reaching out to save others.

And then we had an outpouring of support to help those worst affected areas – from the west to the east, from the north to the south – groups like the Student Volunteer Army and the Farmy Army joined forces with service groups and others.

Nothing will ever compare with the sight of hundreds of students pouring down my street in Bexley – it made me feel so proud – and it continues to give me inspiration for the future.

I recently met with the families of some of those who died three years ago to discuss a number of issues. I was impressed with their guiding principles which are to be inclusive and to use their knowledge and experience for future good.

Their overriding message that they asked me to share today is that we honour the people lost in the earthquake by learning lessons from what happened and using the rebuild as an opportunity to make Christchurch a better place and an example of a truly safe city.

When someone dies in circumstances that might have been prevented, one of the only things that can create meaning from the loss is the knowledge that someone in the future has been saved from going through the pain of losing someone in such circumstances.

It is the best way to honour those whose lives were lost.

All of the international experience tells us that the third anniversary after a disaster can be particularly hard for people. Let us take that as a challenge for us as a city to accept.

Let us unite as we did after the earthquakes. For those of us who have been able to move on, let us reach out to those who are still struggling. For those who cannot move on, please do not be afraid to ask for our help. Let us not judge people for where they are or how they got there. How ever you are feeling right now, as the posters say, it's all right. We can get through this together.

I believe that we can not only learn lessons from what occurred on that day, but also from what happened afterwards.

We broke down all the barriers. People simply worked together to get things done.
I believe that's one of the reasons why we have young people constantly reinventing the city centre creating interesting and unexpected uses of space.

People realised that they could do something and so they did. That is the spirit we must encourage.

It is this sense of optimism and creativity that can be a legacy of our experience, making Christchurch not only a safe city but one which enables each one of us to create the life we want to lead.

We are at a turning point.

Let us claim our future – remembering our past, honouring those whose lives were lost or changed forever, acknowledging the significance of Christchurch being the final resting place of many from overseas and what that means for their families, respecting all who make Christchurch their home and creating for ourselves a sense of place where we all belong.