



Christmas – Homily

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
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As we gather here in the Cathedral to celebrate this Christmas Mass, all around the world people are preparing their churches, whether they be beautiful cathedrals, more simple parish churches or humble little chapels, for the same celebration.

We are joining countless millions of people around the globe as we celebrate the extraordinary gift which God gives us: the gift of Himself in the form of a tiny, helpless, vulnerable baby.

In Rome too, in St Peter's Basilica, the same preparations are being made. They are seven hours behind us here in Perth and I am sure that the workers have been busy bringing in flowers, putting out seats and preparing for the arrival of the Pope. We should keep Pope Francis in our prayers as we gather here at this time in our beautiful Cathedral.

Ever since his election, Pope Francis has captured the world's attention. Many of us will remember the moment when he announced that he wished to be called "Francis". We are told that he chose the name partly in response to one of the cardinals who whispered to him, as it became clear that he would be elected to the papacy, "Don't forget the poor".

St Francis of Assisi, of course, was, and is, *the* saint of the poor. He became known, in Italian, as the *poverello*, the little, poor one. One of the key moments in the story of his conversion was his encounter with a leper. Previously, he had been repulsed by the outward signs of this terrible disease. Now, having allowed Christ to take hold of his life, the poor and abandoned leper became the presence of Christ to Francis, and Francis reached out to him with compassion and love.

This is what an encounter with Christ can do for us. It can turn us around and enable us to see things completely differently. We might even say that we begin to see the world with the eyes of a child on Christmas Day - we become, as Jesus once invited us to, like little children, hopeful, trusting and open to the beauty and goodness in the world around us. This



is the real miracle of Christmas - or at least it can be if we are open to it: that we begin to see the world around us, and especially the people around us, with the eyes of Christ. And, of course, once that happens, we will find that we also begin to speak with the words of Jesus, respond with the sensitivity and compassion of Jesus, love with the heart of Jesus. We will then find our hearts prompting us to say, when people hurt us, "I forgive you", or when those we love go off the rails, "I don't condemn you", or when people are frightened or alone, "Don't be afraid, for I am with you".

Of all the gifts we can give at Christmas, this is the most precious of all: the gift of our presence in the lives of others, especially our families and friends, but also those who are, in all kinds of different ways, the "lepers" of our own time. Of course, like the presence of God to us in the tiny child whose birth we celebrate this day, it must be a presence which brings love, forgiveness, hope and understanding, not hatred, hard-heartedness or rejection. And this is the other miracle of Christmas: if we really do welcome the birth of this baby in Bethlehem, and allow Him to come into our lives as surely as He came into the lives of Mary and Joseph, then His presence to us will enable us to be present to others in ways that really will be life-giving for them.

So, let us all take the opportunity this Mass offers us as we celebrate Christmas to pause and gaze on the child born in the stable: God present among us to teach us how to be present to each other. Visit the crib after Mass or come back in the next few days when the Cathedral will be quiet and peaceful. St Francis, 900 years ago, created the very first Christmas crib in the tiny village of Greccio in Italy. He welcomed Christ into his life, his eyes were opened and he came to know how to be present in the lives of others: present in compassion, in gentleness and in simplicity. He knew where this new way of seeing came from: it came from the gift of the helpless baby born in Bethlehem. It was because of this that he had the inspiration to create the first Christmas crib - so that he, and all of us, could be reminded in a simple way that the greatest gift we can give to those we love is the gift first given to us by the God who loves us: the gift of presence.

Lord, may we this Christmas learn once again from you the power and the beauty of the gift of our presence to those we love: may we be present to each other as you are present to us.