



Homily - Good Shepherd Sunday 2015

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
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When my appointment as Archbishop of Perth was first announced three years ago, many people asked me what my priorities were. At first, I didn't quite know how to answer such a question but, after my installation Mass, many people spoke to me about the main theme of my homily. Perhaps some of you were present at the Mass. If so, I wonder how you heard the homily, what you understood it to mean. Many of those present had heard it as an announcement of my hopes and dreams for the Archdiocese, as a setting out of my priorities. I have often reflected on this since and I now realise that those people were right.

At the heart of what I said that night was the rather daring and even confronting statement that the greatest challenge facing the Church here in our Archdiocese was, and I would say still is, to return the Church to Christ and to return Christ to the Church. This is a confronting statement because, at least at first glance, it seems to be implying that Christ is not at the heart of His Church. This is, of course, not true. The Church is the Body of Christ, He is its head, and all its life flows from Him. In this sense, the Church is not, and never can be, distanced from Christ. He promised, after all, that He would be with His Church until the end of time and that the gates of hell would never prevail against it.

What I was really saying at the time of my installation as Archbishop, and what I would still want to say today, is that what is true in theory doesn't always seem to be true in practice. The Church, after all, is not simply a building, or even a worldwide institution. The Church is a community of people, called together by God and given the task by Him of being a living and powerful sign of the presence of Jesus in the world. None of us individually can do and be that, and none of us together can do and be that, unless Jesus really is at the centre of our lives, of our relationships, of our decisions, and of our hopes and dreams. The Church is not primarily a social welfare agency, or a provider of quality education for children and young people, or a voice for certain enduring moral values, although the Church is involved in all of these things and many more. The Church is primarily a community of people who have decided, however imperfectly they may live it out, to be followers of Jesus, friends and companions of Jesus, and witnesses to the goodness, and the joy, and the peace which is His gift to those who commit themselves to Him. But again, for us to be all this and do all this, we must very consciously, deliberately and persistently keep placing Jesus at the centre of all we do. We have to give our lives back to Him, over and over again, day after day. This is what being a Christian means.

When I was appointed as the Archbishop of Perth, I took a new motto for my episcopal crest. It is made up of three simple Latin words: *via, veritas, vita* – the Way, the Truth, the Life. This is what Jesus proclaimed Himself to be – and Christians take Jesus at His word. For us, He



is the way we should go and the one who leads us along the right path in life. For us, He is the Truth in which we should believe and to which we will want to commit ourselves. For us, He is the Life, who both shows us what real human living looks like and helps us with His grace and His presence to live that way. If we want to take a safe path through life, if we want to commit ourselves to values and attitudes that are truly human, and if we want to live our lives to the full, then we will have Jesus at the centre of our lives. And, if we do everything else, our lives – our relationships, our jobs, our friends, our work, our fun and relaxation – will all become richer and more deeply satisfying. Putting Christ first won't crowd other things, or people, out. It will help us to appreciate and enjoy them more.

As I have thought more about this in my three years as Archbishop, and as people have asked me over and over again about my priorities, one of the things I have begun to say is that I hope, partly through what I can contribute to the Archdiocese, that we, the Catholic community of Perth, can together become, more than we are already, a people walking in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd. Today's Gospel speaks very clearly to us about what this means. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep first and Himself second. The Good Shepherd doesn't look to His own interests or seek to preserve His own safe position. The Good Shepherd does whatever it takes to care for His flock, even if it costs Him His life.

If we, the Catholic people of Perth, are going to be a credible sign of the presence of Jesus alive in our midst, present and active in our society, we together, as a community of faith, are going to need to have the same attitudes, the same courage, the same selflessness and the same determination which were so characteristic of Jesus during His life. And we will only be able to do this if we put Jesus back where He belongs – at the very heart of our Church, of our families, or our communities, and of our individual lives.

This is the invitation to all of us – we will, of course, respond to it in our own ways. For most people, it will mean living our Christian faith as husbands and wives, as parents and grandparents, as people involved in all the different aspects of our society. For some, who will experience in a particular way the fascination and attractiveness of Jesus, it will involve the brave decision to offer themselves to the Church as religious men and women or as priests. But for all of us, the call is the same. The greatest challenge facing each one of us here in the Cathedral this morning is to return our lives to Christ and to return Christ to the centre of our lives.