



Third Sunday of Advent & Opening of the Holy Door Homily

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Saturday 12 and Sunday 13 December 2015
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth

There is a prayer prayed by the Church during this season of Advent which captures very well, I believe, what has led Pope Francis to proclaim a Jubilee Year of Mercy, which we inaugurated here in the Cathedral last Tuesday. On that day, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the Pope opened the special Holy Door of Mercy in St Peter's Basilica and, tonight, we have solemnly opened our own Holy Door here in our Cathedral. At the same time, a number of churches throughout the Archdiocese have been nominated by me as special places of pilgrimage. They, too, will open a Holy Door tonight or tomorrow so that all of us have a chance to enter symbolically into an experience of the Lord's great mercy.

The prayer to which I am referring is prayed over the gifts during one of the weekday Advent Masses. *"Be pleased, O Lord,"* it asks, *"with our humble prayers and offerings, and, since we have no merits to plead our cause, come, we pray, to our rescue with the protection of your mercy."*

It is worth reflecting for a moment on the meaning, and the implications, of such a prayer, and also on what attitudes of mind and heart we would need in order to be able to pray this prayer with sincerity.

What strikes me very strongly is that only a really humble person, which is to say, a really honest person, can pray this prayer with integrity. After all, the prayer is based on a very fundamental element of our Christian Faith: namely, that Jesus is our saviour.

The prayer reminds us, first of all, that we need rescuing, that we need saving. For many of us, this is easy to believe. We are, or at least often can be, painfully aware of our weaknesses, our failures, and our sins. Every time we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we begin by recognising this: we pause to acknowledge our sins, seek God's forgiveness, and, in this way, prepare ourselves to enter into a celebration that we know we are never really worthy to share in.

Sometimes, of course, this ritual at the beginning of Mass can be very routine. We say the words, but there may not be a great deal going on in our hearts. We can take comfort in knowing that the Lord understands even this about us and only asks that we keep trying



to be sincere. But, at the same time, the Gospels show us that it is only when people come to Jesus deeply conscious of their need, deeply aware of their own inability to remedy their situation, and full of hope that the Lord can do for them what they cannot do for themselves, that He is able to reach into them, bringing the healing and the renewal of life they so desperately desire. The blind, the lame, the lepers, the sinners, all receive the gift of God's love when they finally reach the stage where they realise that only God can help them. God never forces Himself upon us. God always respects our freedom. But, like the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son, He is constantly waiting, ready to throw His arms around us in love and forgiveness as soon as we make a move towards Him. And, indeed, He is constantly prompting us to make such a move - but the move must be ours.

The prayer deepens our sense of humility by expressing the truth, difficult for many to accept, that, in and of ourselves, we have no merits to plead our cause. In the end, all we can do is come to the Lord in honesty, sorrow and hope, throwing ourselves on His mercy. We cannot demand that we be forgiven, or rewarded, or exalted or restored: we can only come, as the poor man did who sat at the back of the Temple, praying "*Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner*".

There has always been a great temptation in many strands of Christianity to believe, or at least to act as if, we can win our salvation through our own efforts: that we can somehow deserve to be saved. If we say enough prayers, or do enough penance, or give enough money to the poor, then God will have no choice but to reward us. But this is not true Christianity: it is certainly not Catholic tradition or teaching. It is not our good deeds which will save us: rather, it is our faith in Jesus, which is to say our constant entrusting of our lives to Him, which will save us - and it is this faith that will inspire us to do good things because, as we give ourselves in love to Christ, His mind and heart will form within us and we will begin to see, and hear, and speak, and love, as He does. And what will lead us to live in this trusting way? The recognition, and serene acceptance that, left to ourselves, we are helpless but, united to Christ, we are made strong.

Because we are sinful and broken people, and because, in spite of this, we always remain God's deeply loved children, it is God's mercy which saves us, lifts us up, and enables us to grow more and more into the people He is calling us to be. And this is the message of Pope Francis. God looks on us with love, not condemnation; with compassion, not with harsh judgement; with mercy, not with exacting legalism. And again, as Pope Francis reminds us, it is because He looks on us with a merciful gaze and with deep compassion that He goes beyond the surface of our sins to see if, in our hearts, there is at least the seed of a desire to love Him and give ourselves to Him.

The seed of desire is enough, the honest acceptance of our need is sufficient, for God's mercy to begin to flow in us and transform us. May the Holy Door we have solemnly opened this evening stand as a symbol for us of the Lord's constant invitation: "*Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon*



you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."