



**Christmas 2015  
Homily**

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth

When I was a young boy, one of the things we used to do in our family was to make paper chains out of different coloured paper squares and then decorate the house with them. I'm not sure if children still do this today – I am sure there are more professional commercial decorations available these days - but it gave us a lot of fun and was a good way for us to get involved in preparing our home for Christmas.

Each little circle of coloured paper, of course, is an essential part of the process, but it only all comes together when you link each of the coloured loops to the others to make the chain. The little loops on their own don't serve much purpose. They need to be joined together.

Our Christian faith is something like that. Each of the different things we believe is an important and essential part of the whole but our faith will only really make sense to us when we begin to see how each of the things we believe is linked together to reveal the beauty of the whole.

As we celebrate Christmas tonight, and as we retell the stories of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, our celebration is a little like one of those paper links in the chain. It will have its own interest and beauty, and it is absolutely essential to our faith, but it will only really make sense when we begin to see how it is linked to everything else we believe.

If, in this spirit, we were to ask why, through the miraculous event of Jesus' conception and birth, God has come among us in this extraordinary and surprising way, we would need to look back to the very beginnings of our human story to find the answer. That story is lost in the mists of time and science is only beginning to unlock the mystery of our origins. Nevertheless, whether it all started with the Big Bang or in some other way, our faith teaches us that God is the source of everything, that God created human beings out of love, and that God's original intention was for us to live in harmony and intimacy with Him and with each other here on earth and to live forever with Him and each other in eternity. Our faith also teaches us that the first human beings foolishly and tragically turned away from God and, in doing so, turned on each other - and we are still living with the terrible legacy of that betrayal, and still making our own contribution to it.



When we come to understand that God created us to live our lives as human beings in deep and personal friendship and love with Him, but that we, from the very beginnings of our human history, have turned our backs on God, with all the terrible consequences that brings - consequences we see playing out all around us in the increasing violence and inhumanity which marks our age - then we can begin to appreciate the meaning, and the invitation, of Christmas. We may have distanced ourselves from God, we may have lost our sense of who God really is and how much God loves and cherishes us, but God has never distanced Himself from us, just as God has never stopped loving and cherishing us. We are made by God, we are made for God and, no matter how determined we may sometimes be to ignore God or maintain a safe distance from Him, God never gives up on us. And, at its heart, this is what Christmas means: it is the celebration of God's determination never to abandon us, no matter how often we may seek to abandon Him.

But, as Pope Francis reminded us recently, God comes gently, and simply and humbly, always inviting but never forcing Himself on us. This, of course, is what real love always does: it does not impose, or coerce, or demand. It calls, it beckons, it invites and it offers - but it always leaves us free to give our "yes" - or to withhold it. God did not - and does not - come to us in power, or in force. God comes in the form of a helpless, fragile and vulnerable baby. He wants, we might say, to tug at our heart strings, as babies always do. He wants, through His gentle presence to us, to call the very best out of us, to soften our hardness of heart, to loosen the bonds of selfishness which constrict us - in other words, He wants to set us free. In our traditional theology, we say that He wants to be, and is, our saviour - but we must give our "yes", or our "no", to this gift of freedom, of salvation.

Our answer is often a "no" to God's invitation. Our "no", however, is never, in this life, taken by God to be our final word. God remains close to us, in ways that we may never realise, always seeking to draw a "yes" from us - not for His sake, of course, but for ours. This is what Pope Francis invites us to remember as we celebrate the Year of Mercy. The Pope has called Jesus "the face of the Father's mercy". Tonight, we are invited to see that mercy shining on the face of the helpless, vulnerable infant in the manger, God among us, who entrusts Himself to us in the hope that we will, in the end, not reject or abandon Him but welcome Him into our homes and into our hearts. He comes bearing the gift of life, and joy and peace. Can we find it in our hearts to give Him our "yes"?

May your Christmas be filled with joy, with peace and with renewed hope - and may it be marked by a resounding "yes" to all that God is offering you. I wish you all a happy and holy Christmas.