



**2016 Good Friday
Homily**

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
Friday 25 March, 2016

One of the great mysteries of Good Friday, and one which is brought out so starkly in our liturgy this afternoon, is the question of just why Jesus had to die. In speaking about this, I am not so much thinking of the more profound question of how His suffering and death free us from our sins in fulfilment of God's will. That, itself, is a profound mystery which takes us into the very depths of our understanding of God, and our relationship with God, especially in terms of the presence and power of evil and sin in our own lives and in the world in which we live.

Rather, in asking the question of why Jesus had to die, I am thinking more of the strange paradox that a man whose whole life was one of love, of self-giving, and of peace, should provoke so much bitterness, opposition and hatred.

It is true that some of the religious leaders of His time found it hard, if not impossible, to reconcile His teaching and His way of acting with their interpretation of their own religious traditions. It is true, also, that Jesus seems to have been the victim of a political power play between some of the Jewish leaders and their Roman occupiers. But none of this can quite explain the frenzy of violence and hatred which surrounded His arrest, His torture and his Crucifixion.

Of course, the death of Jesus can only really be understood in the context of His life. From the very outset, Jesus was feared, opposed, and rejected. Mary and Joseph had to flee into Egypt to protect the infant Jesus from death at the hands of Herod's soldiers. Once Jesus began His life of preaching and teaching, opposition to Him quickly grew, especially among some of the religious leaders of the day, though not so much among the ordinary people. And it is amazing that some of the most bitter opposition emerged because of His miracles of healing, especially if they took place on the Sabbath Day, when one interpretation of the religious law insisted that no work, not even good work, could be performed. It is hard, I think, to grasp how people can be so consumed by hatred, or fear, or ignorance that even miracles which set people free to live life fully and joyfully, can be ignored or interpreted so negatively.

There is a phrase which occurs often in our scriptures which, although it doesn't explain it, does capture very well what seems to be happening. It is the phrase, "hardness of heart". Already, in the Old Testament, God is spoken of as the One who wants to take away from His people their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh instead. In one of the psalms, we pray that God would create in us a pure heart. And, in the New Testament, in contrast to the hardness of heart of those who oppose Jesus, the extraordinary love of Jesus is symbolised in His own heart, which is pierced as He hangs on the cross.



Hardness of heart is a sickness which stops us from seeing things as they really are. In this sense, it is a kind of spiritual blindness. Indeed, on one occasion, Jesus rebukes those who are opposing Him because, He says, insisting, as they do, that they can see, those who reject Him will never find their way to the truth. Their eyes are closed and their hearts are cold – but they do not realise it.

As we gather here in the Cathedral this afternoon to enter into the mystery of the suffering and death of Jesus, we are being invited to acknowledge that, like some of the Jewish leaders of Jesus' own time, our hearts, too, might have grown cold and our eyes might have become clouded. We do not see as we should, or feel, and love, as we should. It can be difficult, and confronting, for us to admit this to ourselves and to others. But, if we can, then we can come to Jesus in the same way that a blind man once came to Him. *"What do you want me to do for you?"* Jesus asked the man. And his reply? *"Lord, let me see again."* Jesus' response was immediate: *"Go; your faith has made you well."*

The Gospel tells us that, immediately, the man regained his sight and began following Jesus along the road. Jesus always met opposition, rejection and hatred with love. And, whenever someone came to him with faith, and humility, and a recognition of his or her own helplessness and need, as the blind man did, Jesus reached out with grace and healing. Indeed, it was almost the very last thing Jesus did before He died. When the thief who was crucified beside him prayed, *"Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom"*, the response of Jesus was immediate. *"Truly I say to you,"* He said, *"today you will be with me in paradise."*

As we remember today the moment when the heart of Jesus was pierced by a lance, and blood and water flowed out, symbolising that Jesus held nothing back in giving Himself to and for us in love, let us ask Him to open our eyes to His love for us, take out of our flesh our hearts of stone, and place within us hearts of flesh so that we can allow ourselves to be loved by Him, and, in turn, love Him and all His people.