



**First Sunday of Advent 2016 (Year A)
Homily**

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
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As some of you may remember, I was fortunate enough to attend World Youth Day in Poland this year with a large group of young people from our Archdiocese. On one occasion we had the opportunity to listen to an address from Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Archbishop of New York. He spoke very powerfully of the experience of World Youth Day as a moment of decision.

"Now is the time to act," he stressed. *"Now is the time to give your 'yes' to God's invitation."* After the talk one of the Australian bishops who was there went to Cardinal Dolan to tell him that a young teacher, not a Catholic, who had come with some of the senior students from the diocese, came to him to announce that she had been so moved by the Cardinal's talk that she had decided to become a Catholic. I saw that bishop at our Bishops' meeting in Sydney last week and he told me that this young woman was now a part of their Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) program. She would become a Catholic soon. She has given her "yes" to God's invitation.

The idea of a time to act is captured also in today's Gospel, but with perhaps even a little more urgency. *"Stay awake, stand ready,"* says Jesus. *"because the Son of Man is coming to you at an hour you do not expect."*

This call to stand ready is connected very much to the idea of missed opportunities. Jesus hints at this when he approaches Jerusalem, the Holy City, towards the end of his life. *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem,"* he cries. *"How often have I longed to gather you together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing, but you would not listen"*. It is almost as if Jesus's heart is breaking as he contemplates the tragedy of an opportunity lost for so many of God's people.

On a more individual level, there is the story in the Gospels of the rich young man who was offered the opportunity to become one of Jesus's disciples. *"Go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor and then come, follow me."* How tragic it was for this young man, and for all those whose lives he might have enriched, that he was so attached to his wealth that he simply could not leave it behind, even for such a great gift. We are told that he walked away from Jesus, sad at heart.

Closer to home, we might reflect on the Special Jubilee Year of Mercy called for by Pope Francis, which finished just two weeks ago, when our own Holy Door was solemnly closed after the last Mass on Sunday evening. This special year offered so much to us in terms of seeking, and finding, the experience of God's mercy in our lives. But did we make the most of it - or was it too an opportunity lost?



The extraordinary thing about God of course is that he never tires of offering us new opportunities. He never becomes so frustrated with our blindness or stubbornness or foolishness that he decides: enough is enough - no more chances for her or for him. We might think this way, but God does not.

Today, we begin a new liturgical year with this celebration of the first Sunday of Advent. It is a special time of opportunity, a chance to once again pause long enough to listen to God saying to us, *"Come to me, listen to me, learn from me, let me show you the way, let me help you to be the person I created you to be, let me give you life"*. Throughout this time of Advent we will hear St John the Baptist cry out, *"prepare a way for the Lord"*.

We will hear the angel Gabriel say *"nothing is impossible for God"*. Over and over again we will hear the words addressed to many people, *"Do not be afraid"*. We will hear the angel assure Mary, as the Lord assures us, that *"the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High God will cover you with its shadow"*. And all of this will point to the most important thing of all: a child will be born for us, a Son given to us. He will be Emmanuel, God with us, and in him and through him we will finally begin to know God as he really is – if we make the most of the opportunity to grow in faith which Advent offers us.

Advent is a time of hope, a time of promise, a time of opportunity and a time of preparation. But perhaps most of all it is a time of invitation. God wants to come to us, stay with us, help us to grow and lead us to the fullness of life. But God does not force himself upon us: he quite simply offers to come - and we are the ones who must choose to own the doors of our lives, of our hearts, to him - or not to do so.

One of the psalms captures the spirit of Advent beautifully. Let me conclude with the invitation it offer us: *"If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts"*.