



Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday Homily

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
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"If Christ has not been raised then our preaching is useless and your believing it is useless" (1 Cor 15:14).

With these words Saint Paul in his first Letter to the Corinthians brings us to the very heart of our celebration tonight/today and to the very heart of our faith. As we gather to remember and to be drawn into the reality of the Lord's rising to new life these words of Saint Paul challenge us to reflect deeply on the significance of the Lord's resurrection, particularly when Saint Paul goes on to say that *"if our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are the most unfortunate of all people"* (1 Cor 15:19).

Behind these challenging words of Saint Paul there lies something which, surprising as it might sound, is so very easy for us to forget. Our faith, before it is anything else, is faith and trust in and love for a person, Jesus Christ, who through his resurrection is alive and present to us in the most intimate of ways. Without Christ at the centre of our faith, of our lives and of our Church, we are like people wandering in the darkness not really knowing what we are being called to do and to be. Our Easter celebration tonight/today invites us to open our hearts and our lives to him and to let him make his home with us.

On the night before he died Jesus said to his closest disciples, the ones he knew would desert him the following day, *"I do not call you servants any more: I call you friends"* (Jn 15:15). He says the same to us. Friendship is a precious gift. It brings companionship, relaxation, joy, and energy to our lives. It is a gift we both receive from others and give to others and our lives would so much less fulfilling if no-one offered friendship to us or if we never offered the gift of our friendship to others. How much truer is this of the friendship the Lord offers us and the friendship we can offer him in return. And while so many of our friendships are marked by moments of misunderstanding, of coolness and even of suffering, the friendship the Lord offers us is constant, unconditional and absolutely trustworthy. As St Paul says in one of his letters, *"we may be unfaithful but God is always faithful, for God cannot disown his own self"* (2 Tim 2:13).

This desire and need for friendship, and the way it can be fulfilled in our relationship with the Lord, is captured beautifully in a prayer of Saint Augustine: *Lord, you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.* Here perhaps we get a sense of what Saint Paul meant when he said that our hope in Christ is not for this life only. As those who were called by Jesus to follow him during his life on earth came to know and understand him better, and as they were drawn deeper and deeper into a relationship of intimacy and love with him, they could not help but be set on fire both by his presence and by all that he taught them about God. Never



before had someone spoken with such conviction of a God of overwhelming love, compassion and mercy. Never before had someone dared to address God, and invite everyone else to address God, as a little child might address his father. Never before had someone compared God to a father who puts his life on hold until his wayward prodigal son comes to his senses and returns home. The God whom Jesus spoke about, and spoke to in prayer, was a God worth believing in, even if to Jesus' hearers such a God was almost too good to be true. Jesus brought something to life in the hearts of his disciples, he enkindled hope within them, and anything less than the God Jesus proclaimed would never satisfy them again.

The shocking arrest, the brutal torture and the horrific execution of Jesus must have been for Jesus' disciples a time of unbearable despair. Jesus, they sadly concluded, must have been mistaken about God, for how else could you explain the way in which Jesus died? With the death of Jesus the faith and the hopes of his disciples must have died too. What we call Good Friday evening and Holy Saturday must have been a time of terrible desolation for them.

Only when we understand this can we also begin to understand the incredible depth of their joy, and in a sense also their struggle to believe, as the disciples began to encounter the risen Lord in the days after his resurrection. Now they knew, beyond all expectation, that all that Jesus had said about God was true. God was as close, as compassionate, as forgiving, and as merciful as Jesus had said he was. And equally importantly, Jesus himself was all that he had proclaimed himself to be: the Son of God, one in communion with his heavenly Father, the very presence of God among us, our Emmanuel. The gift of friendship which Jesus had offered his disciples was the gift of friendship with God. The promise of forgiveness was God's promise. The assurance of eternal life was God's assurance. It was all true.

Because of the resurrection it still is all true. The Lord is still with us, living in his Church, constantly unveiling the depths of the mystery of God, and inviting us to be his friends. It is all gift, never earned, always freely offered, never withdrawn. And as Saint Augustine reminds us if we accept the gift and allow its richness to fill our lives our restless hearts and spirits will gradually grow calm.

Today is a time for celebration. It is a time for laughter, for deep joy, and for renewed hope. The Lord is risen. He holds out the hand of friendship to us. He wants to make his home within us. He wants to help us live our lives to the full now and in eternity. Say "yes" to this gift. Accept this offer made in generosity and love. Begin to live your lives in Christ, and allow him to enrich the lives of all you love. Let your restless hearts and your restless lives be stilled by the power of his gift of Easter peace.