



Mass of the Lord's Supper Homily

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
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Tonight we celebrate the last moments of freedom for Jesus before he is handed over to his enemies who will finally achieve what they have tried to do for so long; to silence this dangerous and troublesome man whose goodness is such a reproach to their own callousness, self-centredness, fear and hypocrisy.

Jesus has been preparing for this night for a long time. Indeed there is a very real sense in which his whole life has been a preparation for this night, and for what would follow the next day. St Luke's Gospel tells us that even as a twelve year old boy, Jesus already understood that his whole life must be about his Father's business. This was what he said to Mary and Joseph when they finally found him in the Temple after he had been missing for three days. And it was Mary and Joseph, of course, who many years before had listened to the words of Simeon when they presented their new born son in the Temple. Speaking to Mary, Simeon said of Jesus that he would be the cause of the falling and the rising of many in Israel and that she, Mary, would find her own soul pierced as by a sword. This was a prophecy which would be fulfilled as Mary stood at the foot of the cross on that terrible Friday afternoon, watching her son die.

Jesus himself was aware of how determined his enemies were to destroy him and he understood that they would eventually succeed. On a number of occasions he spoke to his disciples of his impending death in Jerusalem, trying to prepare them for what was to come. It was on one such occasion that he asked his disciples a question which has continued to ring through the ages: *who do you say that I am?*

It seems to me that Jesus puts this same question continually to us, his present-day disciples. It becomes particularly urgent each year as we come closer to our celebration of Easter. Tonight he puts the question to each of us directly – *who do you say that I am?* In asking it of course he is also asking about who we believe God to be. It is a basic element of our faith that Jesus fully reveals God to us, unveiling the mystery which has been kept hidden for so long. In Jesus God no longer appears as a cloud or as a pillar of fire, as he did to the Chosen People as they wandered through the desert. In Jesus God appears among us, as one of us. As Jesus himself says to one of his disciples, *“to have seen me is to have seen the Father”*. We can understand this to also mean that to hear Jesus is to hear the voice of the Father.

What is it that we hear and see when we listen to and watch Jesus? We could sum it up in one word as indeed the First Letter of Saint John does when it says quite simply that *“God is love”*. But we of course are only human, and we know all too well that our humanity is broken. Our lives are marked by sin, and our love is so often tarnished by selfishness, infidelity and betrayal. For



us it is not enough to say that God is love. We need to see what this means in practice. And tonight, in our liturgy, this is exactly what happens.

Tonight's liturgy invites us to focus in a particular way on three things. The first is the extraordinary gesture of Jesus when he gets down on his hands and knees to wash the feet of his disciples. The second is the even more extraordinary gesture of giving his disciples his body and blood under the appearances of bread and wine, in this way foreshadowing his death on the cross when his body will be broken and his blood poured out for us, and inviting his disciples, in every age, to do all this in memory of him. The third is the journey from the room of the Last Supper to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus will enter into his agony, his disciples will desert him, and he will be arrested. It is the journey we will in a sense replicate this evening at the end of Mass as we carry the Blessed Sacrament from the altar to its place of repose in the Lady Chapel.

Each of these three moments in our liturgy, which draw us into the events of Jesus's last night on earth, teaches us about love. As Jesus gets down on his hands and knees to wash the feet of his disciples, we see that love will always be about humility, about generous and selfless service, about being prepared to abandon our own dignity for the sake of those we love.

As Jesus takes bread and breaks it and gives it to his disciples, and as he takes a cup of wine and shares it with his disciples, and assures them that it is his body and his blood, his whole life and all that he has and is, that he is giving to them in a gesture of profound intimacy, we see that love is prepared to do precisely that: to give everything, to hold nothing back, and in a sense to demand nothing in return. And as Jesus sets out for Gethsemane, having watched Judas leave the room early in order to go and betray Jesus to his enemies, and as he enters into his agony and looks for support from his closest friends only to find that they are fast asleep, and as he then watches them all run away in fear as he is arrested by the Roman soldiers, we see that love is faithful even in the face of infidelity, that it remains steadfast in the face of cowardice, and that it is ready to understand and forgive even in the face of betrayal.

As we contemplate our own story in the face of Jesus's love for us, it must seem to us that we can never reach the high ideal of love he holds out to us. In a sense of course this is true but this should not make us stop trying. More than anything else, the story of Jesus assures us that God's love is most powerfully revealed in his readiness to forgive us. God looks at us with compassion, not with anger. He looks at us with tenderness not with harshness. Like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son he patiently waits for us to return to him, ready to throw his arms around us and rejoice that we have found our way home.

This too is a high ideal. It is not easy to forgive and the deeper the hurt we experience the harder forgiveness becomes. But the Lord does not hold out to us such high ideals without also offering us a way to live up to them. *"Make your home in me,"* says Jesus, *"and I will make my home in you"*. This is precisely the gift of the Eucharist which we are celebrating tonight. The Lord is inviting us into a profound communion of love and life with him.

He wants to share all that he is and has with us and asks us to bring all that we are and have to him. As we gradually learn to do this we will be reshaped, remoulded into his image. What we cannot do on our own we will gradually find ourselves able to do because of our communion with him. We will slowly but steadily grow in our ability and our willingness and our desire to love as



he loves. This is the precious gift he offers us tonight. All we have to do is give our generous “yes” to this offer – or at least to want to do so.