



Palm Sunday

Homily

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Archbishop of Perth**

**Sunday 5 April, 2020
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

Many of you will have been struck, as I was, by the extraordinary images telecast around the world from a deserted St Peter's Square in Rome last week. On a dark and rainy night Pope Francis emerged from Saint Peter's Basilica bearing the Monstrance which contained the Blessed Sacrament. The Pope solemnly, yet simply, blessed the whole world, symbolically present in that empty square, and called upon God's mercy and compassion for his suffering people in this time of crisis. As the Holy Father lifted the monstrance in blessing I couldn't help thinking of Jesus's words: *"When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself"* (Jn 12:32).

It is at the very heart of our faith that Jesus died to save us from our sins. We are reminded of this every time we prepare ourselves to welcome the Lord into our lives in Holy Communion. *"Behold the Lamb of God,"* the priest says as he holds the Consecrated Host before us. *"Behold him who takes away the sins of the world"*. Jesus is lifted up before us, as he was lifted up on the cross – and we are drawn to him. *"Lord,"* we say, *"I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed."* I pray and hope that the enforced fasting from the Bread of Life which so many of you are enduring at this time might deepen your sense of unworthiness, your need for healing and your hunger for him.

The idea of being saved from our sins is deeply connected in our Catholic tradition with the idea of being healed of the sickness, the spiritual brokenness, which afflicts us all. Not all illness is sin; indeed most illnesses are nothing to do with our personal sin and everything to do with the frailty of our human, imperfect and finite lives and our beautiful but imperfect world.

But if not all illness is sin, all sin is a kind of illness, a malady which drags us down, closes us in on ourselves and blinds us to the love and presence of God in us and around us. To be healed of this sickness is to enter into the mystery of salvation; and to be saved is to be healed, freed from all that is stopping us from living and loving as God intends us to do.

This is exactly, of course, the way Jesus was. He lived as God always intended everyone to live, and he loved as God always intended everyone to love. Tragically, and mysteriously, his life and his love were what led him to the cross. Jesus died the way he died because he lived the way he lived – and self-righteous, stubborn, cold-hearted people could no more tolerate this kind of pure



goodness two thousand years ago than they can today. Embarrassed, shamed and frightened by the goodness of Jesus, such people decided that they had to destroy him because they were not prepared to let him destroy in them all that was so dear to them and yet so destructive for them.

Jesus puts before us the same choice today, perhaps in our present difficulties more starkly than ever. Will we entrust ourselves to him and allow him to form within us generous, self-sacrificing, compassionate and loving hearts? Or will we seek in one way or another to banish him from our lives, or at least keep him at a safe distance, so that we protect ourselves from the radical challenge he presents to us, all summed up in the words *“Love one another as I have loved you”* (Jn 13:34)?

When Pope Francis spoke into the emptiness and darkness of Saint Peter’s Square last week, he talked about the *“thick darkness (which) has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by”*. That darkness has descended on the earth before. Saint Luke in his Gospel tells us that when Jesus died, the sun was eclipsed and a darkness came over the whole land. But just as that darkness was dispelled by the resurrection of Jesus, so the present darkness will be dispelled, but not because the Coronavirus runs its course and everything goes back to normal. Rather it will be dispelled because we, the disciples of Jesus, will not have allowed the fear, the uncertainty and the discomfort of the present situation to turn us in on ourselves. Instead, with God’s grace, we will recognise that now more than ever we have a chance to *“love one another as he has loved us”*. The Coronavirus, and the suffering it is bringing to so many, provides us with a chance to be large-hearted in our generosity, in our compassion, in our patience and in our trusting faith in God. And this, perhaps, is the precious gift hidden in the crisis we are facing. But if we are to unearth this gift and recognise it for what it is, we will need to allow ourselves to be drawn to the one who was lifted up on the cross, who was lifted up in blessing on the world by Pope Francis, and who wants to rise in our hearts if only we would let him.