



**Sixth Sunday of the Year
Blessing of the New Crucifix**

Homily

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

**Sunday 16 February, 2020
St Mary Star of the Sea Church, Cottesloe Mosman Park Parish**

Many of you will remember that in 2016, the Catholic Church throughout the world, at the invitation of Pope Francis, lived what the Pope called the Extraordinary Year of Mercy.

As each year goes by, it becomes clearer that the theme of *mercy* is at the very heart of the pontificate of Pope Francis. Another way of saying this is to suggest that Jesus Christ is at the heart of the pontificate of Pope Francis, because as the Pope reminded us in launching the Year of Mercy, in Jesus Christ we see the face of our Heavenly Father's mercy.

Whenever I visited parishes or Church agencies or Catholic schools in 2016 and spoke of the Year of Mercy I tried to explain it, especially to our young people, by saying that the Pope was calling us to bring alive in our own lives the large-heartedness of Jesus. In this sense, I think it is true to say that Jesus is the incarnation, that is the manifestation in our human story, of the large-hearted God in whom we believe. After all, only large-hearted people are merciful people and so, for us, to speak of a merciful God is to speak, in human terms, of a large-hearted God.

In today's Gospel, when Jesus speaks of his mission to bring to fulfilment all that is contained in the law of Moses, this centrality of the heart becomes very clear. When Jesus says, "*You have heard how it was said*", he is referring very deliberately to one or other aspect of the Jewish Law. When he then goes on to say, "*But I say this to you*", he is not changing the law - In fact he says this quite explicitly - but rather is calling people to a deeper fidelity to the law, a fidelity which arises from a compassionate heart rather than from a mere desire to follow the letter of the law.

In doing this, Jesus reveals himself to be radically faithful to his own Jewish traditions. Often in the Jewish Scriptures we read of God preferring mercy to sacrifice, justice to the oppressed to empty fidelity to legal regulations, and in general a deeper fidelity to the law born of love for God and a desire to walk faithfully in the way God has set out for us.



In the end Jesus, as we will hear in next Sunday's gospel passage, sums his teaching up in these words: *"You must be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect"*.

These words of Jesus, which seem to present us with an impossible task, have become more and more important to me as time goes by. None of us is perfect - I certainly am not - and none of us is likely to find ourselves perfect at the end of our lives when God calls us home to him. What Jesus is saying to us, I suspect, is that we should recognise what God is asking of us, acknowledge the high ideals to which God is calling us, and never allow ourselves to believe that we should give up on those ideals or turn our backs on them simply because they seem at times to be so far from our grasp.

For me at least a few things flow from this. Firstly, I need to be open to all that God is asking of me no matter how difficult it may seem. Secondly, I need to pray for the humility to acknowledge my own weakness, frailty and sinfulness and turn to God for help knowing that I am helpless to save myself. Thirdly I need to invite God, and allow God, to form in me a merciful and compassionate heart based on my realisation that I am no better, no more perfect, than anyone else, and that we are all in need of the support, compassion and forgiveness of each other.

This is part of what it means to belong to the Church and for you as parishioners of this parish to belong to this particular community of faith. We need the support and guidance which comes from being part of the Church in order to keep walking in the footsteps of Jesus our Good Shepherd. In this way we can ensure that we do not get led astray by other leaders, no matter how charismatic they may be. For us as Christians, it is the voice of Jesus to which we listen and the way of Jesus which we follow. Living as we do in a time of such rapid change and upheaval our engagement in the life of the Church, and especially in our weekly celebration of the Eucharist together as a community, is perhaps more important than it has ever been.

Challenging though our times are, and difficult though it is to live lives of fidelity and trusting faith, it is important for us not to give up. Your parish is dedicated to Mary, the Star of the Sea. When at the Annunciation Mary was first confronted by what God was asking of her, Saint Luke's gospel tells us that she was frightened and confused. She did, of course, finally give her yes to God's call but only after the angel Gabriel had spoken these words to her. *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High God will cover you with its shadow"*. When Mary heard these words and believed them in her heart, she found the courage, in spite of her fear and confusion, to say yes even though she did not fully understand what that yes would involve. As disciples of Jesus these same words of Gabriel have been spoken, and are being spoken, to us: *Do not be afraid. What God is asking of you might seem to be beyond your strength but remember the Holy Spirit is with you, and the power of the Most High God covers you with its shadow. Go ahead with confidence and with trusting faith, allow the Holy Spirit to lead you forward into the fullness of life and truth. God is with you. You do not need to be afraid.*