



## Third Sunday Ordinary Time (Australia Day)

### Homily

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Archbishop of Perth**

**26 January 2020  
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

In both our first reading today and in the Gospel reading, we hear of the prophecy of Isaiah that a great light would shine on those who walk in darkness and in the shadow of death. As we gather in the Cathedral for Mass today, and as we celebrate and thank God for all the gifts with which God has blessed this land of Australia, we are particularly conscious of the terrible suffering which has been experienced, and still is, by so many people whose lives have been impacted, sometimes in terrible and deadly ways, by the bushfires which have raged across so much of our country. The darkness which descended on people as the thick smoke blotted out the light of the sun, and the shadow of death which enveloped so much of our land, have been frightening, destructive and deadly. Those directly affected by the bushfires, and to a lesser extent the rest of us who have watched with horror as the seemingly unstoppable devastation continued, have some very real sense of what it means to walk in darkness and to be covered by the shadow of death. So many people have been not only suffocated by smoke but also paralyzed by fear. So many have not only lost their homes and livelihoods, but perhaps also their hope for the future.

It is in the midst of this great crisis, that the promise of today's Gospel that a light would shine in the darkness, challenges our faith. Whenever we are faced with great suffering or tragedy, it is understandable if we ask ourselves why God allows such terrible things to happen. We are tempted, perhaps, to doubt whether all that Jesus tells us about God, that he is a loving Father who cares for his children, can actually be trusted. Or perhaps, even if we do not doubt, we still cry out with anguish, or understand and identify with those who do cry out with anguish, as Jesus himself did, "*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why have you abandoned us?*"

The response which our Christian tradition offers us is well summed up in the story of the encounter of Jesus with his disciples on the lake when they are filled with fear as they are confronted by a raging storm, not of fire but of wind and rain. Jesus comes to them in the midst of the storm, assures them that he is with them, tells them not to be afraid, and eventually calms the storm and restores them to safety. He does not immediately still the storm: he comes in the very midst of the storm. It is our belief that in the life and ministry of Jesus we encounter the face, and the voice, and, we might say, the heart of God. God does not abandon us when we are faced with great suffering: he joins us, lends us his strength and offers us the saving power of his presence. Just as Jesus, in his anguish on the cross, could feel as if God had abandoned him, so we can feel the same. But the gospel tradition also tells us that as Jesus died he prayed another prayer: *Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*. God did not save Jesus from death, just as he did not deliver him from his anguish in the garden of Gethsemane; he saved Jesus in and through his suffering and in and through his death.



The two sayings of Jesus on the cross, which seem to be in contradiction to each other, are in fact two deeply human and completely harmonious responses to great suffering. It is right for us to cry out to God in anguish and confusion, just as Jesus did – but at the very same time we are invited, in the midst of our darkness, to entrust ourselves to God with faith – and allow God to be our savior in the way that he chooses. It is faith, trusting faith, which enables us to commit ourselves and our lives into God's hands at moments of great suffering and pain.

In reflecting in this way of the mystery of the suffering and destruction which so many of our Australian brothers and sisters have endured, I am reminded of the famous words of Saint Teresa of Avila:

*Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which He looks with compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.*

If the words, the promise, of today's first reading and today's gospel are to be realised in the midst of this crisis – if a light is going to continue to shine in the darkness and dispel the shadow of death and hopelessness in our land - then it will be because we are ready to allow God to use our hands, our feet, our sense of compassion to reach out and be that light and be that presence which drives the darkness away. As Christians we do it first and foremost by our prayer, genuine and sincere and persistent, for all those who are suffering and for all those who are generously trying to help in so many different ways often at considerable cost to themselves. We can also do so by providing whatever relief we are able to through our contributions to the relief effort. Many of us have done so already. Today, across Australia, Catholics are being asked to contribute to a special collection which will be forwarded to the St Vincent de Paul Bushfire relief fund. At the end of Mass, if you are in a position to help, I ask you to be generous at the special leaving collection.

*The people that lived in darkness has seen a great light; on those who dwell in the land and shadow of death a light has dawned.* Let us all help to make this prophecy come true, at this time of crisis for so many, by the urgency of our prayer and the generosity of our practical assistance. May God bless us all.