



## Chrism Mass

### Homily

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Archbishop of Perth**

**Tuesday 30 March 2021  
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

*"What other people is there that has their gods so near to them as our God is near to us?"* These words, spoken by Moses to the Chosen People and recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy, already so rich in meaning when Moses first spoke them, were fulfilled in a way the Chosen People could never have imagined when *"God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son .....*".

How much ink was spilled, and sadly how much blood was spilled, in the early centuries of the Church's life as the unimaginable idea of God becoming human gradually, and not without opposition, took hold in the minds and hearts of the Christian communities. This was the work of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus had promised to send to the Church in order to lead his people into the fullness of the truth. To acknowledge that the divinity of the man Jesus Christ is a dogma of our faith is not to marginalise it or consign it to some dry theological formula: rather it is to invite the whole Church to confidently continue to rejoice in, and wonder at, the inconceivable love of the Father, who *"loved the world so much that he sent us his only Son"*. Indeed, what other people is there that has its gods so near to them as our God, who in Jesus has taken on our human condition, is near to us!

This presence of God to us in Jesus, which is so much more than God's very real presence to us in truly holy people, is at the heart of our faith. It is why, for example, Pope Benedict could insist, as he did often, that our Christian faith *"is first and foremost a personal, intimate encounter with Jesus, it is having an experience of his closeness, his friendship and his love. It is in this way that we learn to know him ever better, to love him and to follow him more and more"*. *May this happen to each one of us!*" Pope Francis, in his more colloquial style, puts it this way: *"If following him (Jesus) seems difficult, don't be afraid. Trust him, be confident that he is close to you, he is with you and he will give you the peace you are looking for and the strength to live as he would have you do."*

One of the great challenges for the Church in our times, and certainly here in our archdiocese, is to realise both the power of this invitation and the urgency of this task. How are we to become a community which, in all we do, reveals the face of Christ and warmly invites everyone into a lived experience of his closeness, his friendship and his love? How are we to help each other, and all



those we encounter, to trust him and grow in confidence that he is close, and wants to be close, to everyone?

To ask these questions is to begin to reflect on the fundamental vocation of the Church which, as the Second Vatican Council reminds us, is called by God to be *a sacrament of communion with God and of unity among all people*. While it is not unique to Catholics, it is very characteristic of us that we take Saint Paul very seriously when he speaks of the Church, the community of disciples of Christ, as the Body of Christ. Through its teaching, life and worship the Church, in a mysterious way prolongs the presence of Christ on earth. And so, through the very existence of the Church, we can continue to say *“What other people is there that has its gods so near to them as our God is near to us?”*

Tonight’s celebration invites us to reflect on the sacraments as one of the fundamental ways in which God, in Christ, is present and intimately close to us. As we bless and consecrate the oils we are invited to remember that the simple, though eloquent, signs and symbols used in the sacraments - water, oil, wine, bread, gestures and words - all point beyond themselves to a deeper and very startling truth: God is at work here, drawing close to us and drawing us into a relationship of intimacy with him. It is our faith that in and through the sacraments the words of Saint Paul become quite literally true: *I no longer live, for it is Christ who lives in me*.

For most of the sacraments, of course, those called to the priesthood are the ones who are called to be the humble ministers of these celebrations of life-giving grace - and this in spite of, or perhaps because of their, our, poverty, our limitations, and our chequered histories of fidelity constantly betrayed by infidelity. This is both our privilege and our burden. The Lord has called us and commissioned us to be the Spirit-filled enablers of his desire to draw his people to himself. How tragic it would be if we did the opposite: that the ways in which we engaged in the teaching, life and worship of the Lord’s Church drove people away.

The truth is that just as the water, wine, bread, oil, and sacramental words and gestures, point to something deeper, so in an analogous way we ourselves, flesh and blood men, are also called to point to something deeper: we are called, and empowered by grace, to point to, to “sacramentalise”, the presence of Jesus among his people as their Good Shepherd. But while the other signs and symbols, by their very objectivity, point unfailingly to the deeper realities we, as fallible human beings, can easily distort or completely obscure the deeper reality, the reality of the closeness of Jesus to his people, by the way we live, and by the words we speak.

This is why the combining of the blessing and consecration of the Oils, and our renewal of our priestly commitments, in this one liturgy, is so appropriate. As we journey over these last few days of Lent towards the commemoration of the Lord’s passion, death and resurrection, may his words to his disciples at the Last Supper, *“do this in memory of me”*, remind us all, laity, religious and clergy, that this is what the Lord is asking of us - that we break our bodies and spill our blood for the life of others. And may it remind us, who have been called to the priestly ministry, that as



we celebrate the Eucharist with and for God's people, we are committing ourselves to do everything we can to help the people who have been entrusted to our pastoral care to unite with us as we all seek to make our lives a sacrificial gift of love for others. This, after all, is what it means to "*do this in memory of me*".

That we as ordained priests so often live with extraordinary fidelity to this remarkable vocation is a cause for gratitude and praise to God who has listened to the prayer of the bishop at the time of our ordination: *May God who has begun the good work in you bring it to fulfillment*. That there have been moments of infidelity is a cause for sorrow and an invitation to make our own the prayer of one of our Lenten Hymns: *What we have darkened, heal with light, and what we have destroyed make whole*. May both prayers be a source of hope for us as we continue to respond to the Lord's call.