



Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year C)

Homily

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

**Sunday, 19 December 2021
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

As Christmas draws ever closer, now less than a week away, the readings the Church offers us for this Fourth Sunday of Advent invite us to turn our minds and hearts more directly to the great mystery of the incarnation, the mystery of God's overflowing love which leads him, in the person of his son, to come among us as one of us so that, in Jesus, we might see the Father's face and come to know of his mercy.

This is, indeed, a great mystery and when it is revealed to us, especially in the Gospels of Saint Matthew and Saint Luke, we are told of the marvelous, miraculous events which surround the coming of Jesus: the virginal conception of Jesus in the womb of his mother Mary; the unexpected conception of John the Baptist whose parents were thought to be too old to have a child; the strange dreams which Joseph, the husband of Mary, has and which reveal to him the mystery of the origins of the child his wife will bear. We hear, too, of the choirs of angels who announce the birth of Jesus in song to the shepherds who watched their flocks; of the strange visit of the wise men from the East who come bearing gifts for a newborn king; and of yet another dream in which Joseph is warned to flee with his wife and child from the tyrant King Herod who seeks to kill the baby. Thus, the Holy Family is turned into a refugee family.

It should not surprise us that the birth of Jesus is accompanied by such marvels. The mighty and all-powerful God comes into the world as a helpless, fragile baby to begin a life that will eventually lead him to the cross on Calvary. Because of who he is, the death of Jesus on the cross stands on the one hand as the awful symbol of the destructive power of sin and on the other hand as the extraordinary symbol of the limitless love of God for his people.

Those who were present at the birth of Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem, while they must have been aware of the presence and power of God at work, could not have understood that the fullness of God was contained in this tiny child. Those who jeered at him as he died on the cross were blind to what was really happening: that in Jesus God, on our behalf, had entered into battle with the powers of evil. Even less could they have understood that what looked to be the total defeat of goodness and the complete triumph of evil would prove, three days later, to have been the very opposite. The stable in Bethlehem is inseparable from the cross on Calvary and both



only make sense because of the resurrection. This is the source of our Christian hope and the true reason for our celebration of the feast of Christmas.

As far as we know, only one person who was present in that stable in Bethlehem was also present on the hill of Calvary just over thirty years later: Mary the mother of Jesus who gave her initial *yes* to God's plan when the angel Gabriel announced to her that she was to be the mother of the saviour. That *yes*, which must have marked every day of Mary's life from that time onwards, reached its culmination when Mary again gave her *yes*, this time in anguish, as she watched her son die on the cross. That Mary was there, giving her *yes* at the beginning of Jesus's life, that she was present at the key moments of her son's ministry, and that she was there giving her *yes* at the end of his life, explains why we, in our Catholic tradition, have always seen her as the Mother of the Church. Saint Paul reminds us often in his letters that we, the Church, are the body of Christ, with Christ as the head of his body. Just as Mary was the mother of Christ in time, so Mary is the Mother of the Church which is his body. Mary accompanies us on our journey of faith and supports us with her prayers. And as she once did to the stewards who, at the wedding feast in Cana, had discovered that they had run out of wine, so she continues to say to us now: *you do whatever he, Jesus, tells you.*

Because Jesus, when he was dying, gave Mary to us as our mother, and because when her own life came to an end she was taken body and soul into heaven, Mary is not simply a great figure from the past. She is so closely united to her Son in heaven that she cannot help but be united to his people here on earth. We could do no better, in these last few days of Advent, than to ask her to be with us and journey with us as we now, like Mary once did so long ago, prepare to welcome Christ once more into our world, into our lives, into our hearts.