



**Annual Archdiocesan Agencies Mass
Thursday Week 20 in Ordinary Time**

Homily

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Archbishop of Perth**

**Thursday 18 August, 2022
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

There is a beautiful story told about Saint Francis of Assisi that he once spent a whole night in prayer, out in the open in the countryside around Assisi, saying over and over again "*O God, who are you and who am I?*"

There is a very real sense in which it is true to say that the answer to the first part of that question - *O God who are you?* - can be found in the Bible, which we understand to be the inspired Word of God. For Christians, what we call the Old Testament tells the story of the gradual unfolding of the mystery of who God is, while the New Testament, which bears witness to Jesus, gives God's final and complete answer to the question. In Jesus, God makes himself fully known. For us the Old Testament remains incomplete, and can indeed be misleading, unless we read it in the light of the mystery of Jesus himself. For as Jesus, according to John's gospel, says of himself, "*To have seen me is to have seen the Father for the Father and I are one*".

In today's first reading from the Old Testament, therefore, we can recognise a promise God made to his Chosen People which is fulfilled when God sends his Son among us. It is in Jesus God's holiness is displayed. It is in and through Jesus that God will gather all his people together. It is through Jesus that God pours clean water over us and cleanses us of all our defilement. And it is in and through Jesus that God gives us a new heart and a new spirit.

All of this is the precious gift of God, fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the gift which is received in baptism, renewed and strengthened in confirmation, and deepened every time we celebrate the Eucharist together and receive the Lord's body and blood in communion.

But as I find myself constantly reminding young people whose confirmation I celebrate, this is all gift. We cannot earn it, nor claim it as a right because we have lived good lives. Saint Paul once asked the Christian community in Corinth, "*What do you have that you did not receive? And the answer, of course, is nothing. And then Paul challenges them rather bluntly: "If you received it," he asks, "why do you boast as if it were not a gift?"*

I sometimes think we do not pay enough attention to this idea of gift. Yesterday afternoon I met the young people whom I will confirm tomorrow night in Maida Vale, and I reminded them that it



is one thing to be given a gift and to receive it, and another thing altogether to make the most of that, to use it to its full potential.

It is this idea, I think, which can help us make sense of today's rather strange Gospel. We are dealing, of course, with a parable and that means that we are invited to look for the deepest meaning rather than to worry too much about all the specific details. When we do look for this deeper meaning, the thrust of the parable becomes clear. The invitation to the wedding feast represents the gift God offers us. And as the parable makes clear, it is a gift offered to many, indeed to everyone. But as the parable also makes clear, not everyone accepts the gift - not everyone is interested in what the gift has to offer them. Indeed, there are some people who despise the gift and treat badly those who, on the King's behalf, offer the gift to them.

None of this deters the King from continuing to offer his invitation to the wedding feast, just as God never ceases to offer his invitation to the fullness of life. But the King does not force people to come to the wedding feast although, of course, the refusal to accept the gift comes with inevitable consequences. So too, and this is the really important point, God does not force us to receive or use the gifts he offers. But the fact remains that if we close ourselves to the new heart and the new spirit which God offers us in and through Jesus, then we are closing ourselves to God's gift of life.

For all of us who work in and for the Church, and who for that very reason become, in various ways, the face of the Church to the wider community of which we are a part, it is important for us, I believe, both to rejoice in and be rather overawed by, the trust God places in us. For it is we who are, in our various roles, called to be the ones who, in God's name, offer the gift of life to others. God is calling us to do so generously, constantly and faithfully, for it is God's gift we offer, and not our own. But first, of course, God is calling us to accept these gifts ourselves.

There is a simple Latin saying that sums this up very well: *Nemo dat quod non habet*: you cannot give what you have not got. If we really are to be at the service of those with whom and for whom we work it is important that we ask ourselves often if we really are open to the gift God gives us so freely and so generously in so many ways.

"O God, who are you?" asks Saint Francis over and over again. Today it seems to me the Lord is saying this to us: I am the one who offers you the precious gift of life and love, and I do this not just for you but so that, through you, I can then offer these same gifts to others. Receive my gifts with joy, care for them, for they are precious and fragile, and keep them safe so that you can offer them to others in my name and in my love. This is the task we share and the responsibility we carry. Let us help each other to carry it faithfully and well.