



Christmas Novena – Final Mass

Homily

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**Friday 23 December, 2022
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

As this Mass brings our Christmas novena to a close it is natural that our thoughts turn to Christmas Day itself. I am sure that you are all looking to being with family and friends to celebrate once again the birth of Christ, this wonderful gift of God to us. It is a gift, of course, which was not just given 2000 years ago. It is a gift which is renewed every day as the Lord continues to come to us, to stay with us, to heal us and to help us.

Tonight's Mass does not just bring our Christmas novena to a close. It also brings to a close the longer four-week season of Advent. Throughout these four weeks, we have listened to the scriptures as they encourage us, not only to celebrate the coming of Christ at Christmas time but to prepare ourselves for his coming into our lives each day, and for his eventual return when he will call us all into the joy of eternal life.

Advent, then, is all about being prepared. It is all about looking forward in hope. It is all about making a space in our hearts and in our lives for the Lord. This was the message proclaimed by St John the Baptist - Prepare a way for the Lord; make his pathways straight.

This sense of getting ready, of being prepared, of looking forward in hope, is exactly what we find in the prayer of Zachariah, the father of St John the Baptist, which we have just heard read for us in tonight's gospel.

When God first revealed to Zachariah, through the words of an angel, that he and his wife Elizabeth were soon to have a child, Zachariah did not believe it. Both he and his wife were elderly, and they had no children. They both believed that their opportunity to have a family was gone. And because of his lack of faith, Zachariah lost the gift of speech.

Despite Zachariah's lack of faith, his wife Elizabeth did conceive and bear a son, and although everyone expected Zachariah to name his son after himself, Zachariah instead, in obedience to the angel's words, named his son John.

Through this act of obedience and faith, Zachariah's power of speech returned, and it was then that he prayed the prayer to which we have just listened.



It is at the end of that prayer that Zachariah gives thanks to God for the Messiah who is to come. He is the one, Zachariah says, who will give life to those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death. He is the one who will guide our feet along the way of peace. He is the one who, because of the tender mercy of God, will bring forgiveness for sin and a knowledge of God's saving love.

In these words, Zachariah helps us to understand the nature of the gift which God gives us by giving us his Son. It is a gift of life, of hope, of peace, of new beginnings, and of joy.

Zachariah's prayer is itself a special gift for us for it shines a clear light on the great mystery of God's boundless generosity. It is the very essence of God to give, and to keep on giving, and never to take back his gifts.

As we remember this, and thank God for this, we are also being invited to reflect on where we fit in in God's generous plan of love and salvation. I think that something which will happen in many homes over the coming days can provide us with an answer. How many children will be up early on Christmas morning, full of excitement as they rush to see what might be waiting for them under the Christmas tree? How many of you will see the look of delight as the wrapping paper is ripped off to reveal what it conceals? The children have been waiting eagerly for the gifts they will receive, and hopefully, because this is the intention of those who give the gifts, the children will recognise both the value of the gift they have been given and the love and generosity which went into choosing the gift in the first place.

To receive the gift with gratitude, and then to make use of it, and enjoy it, and cherish it, and look after it. This is what every giver of a gift hopes will be the response. And how disappointing it is for the giver if the response is disinterest, disappointment, or lack of gratitude.

Every year as Christmas comes around, we are being invited once again to recognise the wonder and the beauty and the richness of the gift God gives us in his son, Jesus Christ. We are being invited to receive the gift with gratitude, to spend time coming to understand it, learning to cherish it, and doing our best to look after it, and to make full use of it.

God's gift of himself, which we celebrate at Christmas time, is always there, always being offered, never withdrawn. God awaits our response. What will your response be?