



**Fourth Sunday Ordinary Time (Year B)
Feast of Santo Nino**

Homily

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Archbishop of Perth**

**Sunday 28 January 2024
St Mary's Cathedral**

Today's gospel follows on immediately from the gospel we listened to last Sunday, when Jesus quite deliberately chose the twelve men who would become His closest group of followers, His twelve apostles, who in our Catholic tradition we understand to be the foundation stones, after Jesus Himself, of the Church which the Lord founded and to which we all belong.

The choice of those twelve men by Jesus is quite remarkable. We all know the gospel story well enough to remember that only one of those twelve men was able to find the courage to stand by Jesus and stay with Jesus through the terrible reality of His arrest, His passion, and His death.

Apart from the one called the "beloved disciple", whom we usually identify with St John the Evangelist, all the others let Jesus down badly. Judas betrayed Him, and that betrayal was the catalyst for the terrible suffering and death of Jesus. Peter, chosen by the Lord to be the leader of the twelve apostles, denied three times that he even knew who Jesus was. This threefold denial was motivated by fear and cowardice, and certainly not by faith or courage. And in various ways and at various times throughout the three years of Jesus's public ministry, the other ten disciples consistently failed to support him or to understand him.

The remarkable thing about all this is that in the face of the constant failure of His closest disciples to be faithful and reliable supporters of Jesus and His mission, Jesus himself never gave up on His disciples. He was endlessly patient with them, understanding of their weakness and frailty, and always ready to forgive, encourage and support them. A well-known Australian biblical Scholar, Fr Frank Moloney, once summed this up by suggesting that the central theme of St Mark's gospel can be expressed in this way: that the image of Jesus which comes through the gospel is that Jesus never fails His ever-failing disciples.

The famous story of the final encounter between Jesus and Peter, which we find at the end of the gospel of Saint John, the last gospel to be written, captures this idea beautifully. The risen Jesus



takes Peter aside from the other disciples and asks him, three times, if he loves him. Rather than calling him “Peter”, Jesus goes back to Peter's original name, Simon. “*Simon, son of John,*” he says, “*do you love me? Do you love me more than these others do? Do you really love me?*” Each time Jesus asks Peter this question, he gives Peter the chance to redeem one of his three betrayals. “*Yes, Lord, I love you,*” says Peter in response to the first question and then again to the second. And then, in response to the third time Jesus asks him, Peter says “*Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you*”.

Peter's denial of Jesus at the time when Jesus needed him the most did not lead Jesus to abandon him or give up on him. With extraordinary sensitivity and compassion Jesus offers Peter three precious opportunities to reverse his three terrible denials. This is a wonderful example of the truth which Saint Mark's gospel tries to convey to us: that no matter how often we fail Jesus, Jesus will never fail us and never turn His back on us.

In this morning's gospel, after Jesus cures the man possessed by an unclean spirit, people who witness this miracle express their astonishment, not just at the fact of the miracle but at the nature of the teaching of Jesus. Jesus, the people recognise, brings something completely new: it is the power and authority in His teaching, which is backed up by the signs He works. In fact, as today's gospel points out, the people had already recognised the authority and genuineness of Jesus teaching even before he set the man free from the power of the evil one. Jesus reveals, in a way which has never happened before with such clarity in the history of the people of Israel, the face of God's mercy and compassion.

We have as much need to hear about and believe in this extraordinary mercy and compassion of Jesus as did those people who, in today's gospel, had gathered in the synagogue to listen to Jesus. It is as easy for us as it was for the people in Jesus's time to lose our way, to become like those who in Saint Matthews gospel are described as “people who are like sheep without a shepherd”. So often we can find ourselves as unfaithful as those first twelve apostles of Jesus were so regularly. As Pope Francis so often says about himself, we too are sinners in need of God's mercy. This is why we begin every Mass by calling to mind our sins and asking for God's forgiveness. One of the prayers we often use at the beginning of Mass for this purpose expresses this very clearly: “*You were sent to heal the contrite of heart*”, we pray. “*You came to call sinners; you are seated at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us: Lord, have mercy.*”

It is this recognition of our tendency to fail the Lord and to fall into patterns of sin which explains why Pope Francis is constantly reminding us that the Church must be a home for everyone. We all struggle, we all fail, and sometimes we find ourselves caught in situations from which we do not know how to set ourselves free. It is important that we recognise this, and that we remember that the Church is not an exclusive club for the perfect but a home for weak and sinful people who



know they need the grace of God to lead more faithful lives - it is a home, in other words, for each one of us and for all God's people.

In just over two weeks we will celebrate Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Even today it is not too early to begin to reflect on how we might live the six weeks of Lent in such a way as to grow in our awareness of our great need for God's mercy and compassion. Let us all acknowledge the reality of our sinful and broken lives, but in doing so let us also remember that Jesus never fails His ever-failing disciples and he will never give up on us.

As we celebrate the first anniversary of the consecration of this beautiful church, may the Lord, through the intercession of Pope St. John Paul II, renew in us our desire to walk in His way, to remain faithful to His truth, and to live the richness of His life. May this community be a source of hope for us when we are losing hope, a source of strength for us when our own strength fails, and a source of deep faith for us when we are in danger of losing our way.

May the holy child Jesus, the Santo Nino whom we celebrate today, grant us the grace of a renewal of the simplicity, innocence and purity of our childhood, which we have lost, and help us return to his following his way, being faithful to his truth, and living the richness of his life.