



***“Living as disciples of Jesus in a secular society”***

**Year of Youth Catechesis**

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I originally intended to speak on the topic “Living as disciples of Jesus in a society that does not know Him”, but we decided on “Living as disciples of Jesus in a secular society”, keeping in mind that the secular society is a society – by and large – that isn’t interested in Jesus at all. And how do we live in a society that isn’t really particularly interested in who He is, what He is on about, what it means to follow Him, what the joys might be, or what the challenges might be?

So those of us who in one way or another, have decided that we want to follow Him, or at least we are interested in exploring it further, we need to understand right at the start that we are living in a society which actually doesn’t help us particularly to do that.

This was, however, different for me at your age, or maybe even younger. When I was in primary/secondary school. The values that my parents and family were on about; we were a typical average Catholic family, and the values that were taught in our schools were pretty much the same as the values of the society in which we were living.

I was born in 1954. In the 1960s and 1970s, society’s values had not changed as dramatically as they have changed in the past 20 years. What that means is that our society does not support the choice of those who want to follow Jesus.

So straight away it tell you that you need a lot of courage, conviction, support, and you’re going to be prepared for quite a lot of challenges along the way. In saying that, I’m sure I’m telling you something you already know. But I think it’s important for us to recognise, and I don’t want to sound totally negative about our society – because there are many wonderful things about our society – but it is becoming less and less of a society that builds itself on the traditional Christian values of our Christian Catholic faith.

That sets the scene for the question: how do we follow Jesus in a society that does not necessarily help us? I want to focus on three things...

Why would we want to follow Jesus in the first place? Some of you may have answered that question in your lives or be in the process of answering it. Some of your family members and friends may have not answered it or may not even think about it. They might even say to you, “why would you even want to follow Jesus in the first place?”.

The second question would be on the basis of the first question: What does it mean to follow Jesus? Now we might think we know the answer to that, and maybe we do. But there might be dimensions to the following of Jesus that we may not have thought about, that will challenge us,



surprise us, might even frighten us a little bit, or may give us happiness in our lives. What does it look like in practice? How can you spot a disciple of Jesus in the crowd? How can people spot you in the crowd and identify you as a disciple of Jesus?

The third question that is very much related to the last question: How do we help each other to follow Jesus? One thing that I've learned that I've become more sure as days go by is that you can't do it on your own, and you're not supposed to do it on your own.

So there are the three questions I'm going to weave my talk around this afternoon.

To answer the first question, for us in the Catholic faith, there are three dimensions to answer it: "The question of God". Is there a God or isn't there a God? A fundamental question that in some sense is no longer being asked in our society – we have to grapple about it for ourselves and decisions that we make for our lives. I presumed we wouldn't be here if we didn't already answer the question.

But it will lead you to the second question: "Who is God?". So if there is a God, that's the first thing; and is Jesus Christ the man who lived 2000 years ago, suffered terribly, who died a horrible death, and who we believe rose again from the dead? Is He the divine son of God? In other words, both fully human like us, and yet at the same time, God. This is a fundamental question we have to ask if we are going to want to journey along this path of discipleship, because we have to have a good reason to want to follow Jesus; and if the only reason is that he was a good bloke who did some good things, then that is not enough to keep us going. There has got to be more to Jesus than that.

The third question is a trickier one: "Is the Church as the body of Christ and the Sacrament the living, effective sign of salvation?". In our Catholic tradition, all three questions belong to each other and we can't sideline one because it's too hard or challenging or we don't really want to have to deal with it. They are all essential to this question of following Jesus and become problematic, especially in relation to the third question in a society which isn't particularly interested in knowing about Jesus.

Going back to the first question ... I will quote one of the Psalms. "When I see the heavens, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars which you arranged. Who are we that you should keep us in mind, mere men and women that you care for us."

It has always been a real puzzle to me that the astronomers/scientists can be so immersed in the extraordinary universe of which we are a part and not be falling on their knees in adoration of the God who made it. I don't get it. Some people suggest the vastness of the universe and what they would describe as the tiny insignificant spec of this little corner of the universe would say, "How can there possibly be a God?", says exactly the opposite to me. How can you possibly not believe in God when you see the stars?



When I was a lecturer for Introduction of Theology, I would send my students home on their first class, I would tell them: “On the first clear night, lie down in your backyard on your back, spend some time looking into the sky, and then ask yourself ‘who is God that what I can see is a mere fraction of what God has created?’”.

For me, “God, yes or no?” is easy to understand. It’s not easy to understand but it’s easy to answer. The answer to that absolutely changes everything about our lives. That’s why a lot of people in our society don’t want to ask the question because if the answer is “yes”, everything changes. Our life depends on God who gives it to us, that is the implication of saying “Yes, there is a God”. On the other hand, if I say “no”, I’m left with a major challenge. How do I make sense of anything or find any meaning in anything particularly suffering, if there isn’t a God? That’s the first and most important question.

The next slide is of Pope Francis with a smile on his face. These words: “If I say ‘yes’ and take it seriously, it will influence everything I do, everything I believe and everything I try to make of myself”. You are still in the process of making your life and your future; everything you decide to make of yourself will be different if you say “yes” to “there is a God”.

Pier Giorgio Frassati once said: “To live without faith, to live without something to defend, without a steady struggle for the truth; that’s not living, that is just existing.” Sadly, many people aren’t really living their lives, they are just existing. They are living on the surface, and refusing to have the courage to go deeper. That is one way I would describe the current trend of our society.

People are distracting themselves and filling their lives with lots of things so that they can just exist on the surface and not go deeper. Real living is about going deeper. “Do we want to just exist or do we want to just live?” – Pope Francis in relation to Pier Giorgio.

Just be aware there are many ways that people try to explain who God is and what He is about. These are “clichés”, but clichés have some truth in it...

“The watchmaker God” – some people think God gets everything up and running from the start, and leaves after he has done His work, but he is no longer engaged or interested in the world. That is not the God we believe in.

“The God of the gaps” – the God that you call on when can’t find any explanation for something, but the problem is that when science progresses, the gaps become smaller and smaller. Is God really an idea we latch on when we have no better explanation? This is a God we are not going to commit our lives to or build our lives on. Some people think of the impersonal God, the God who doesn’t care.

“Not a personal kind of God you can have a relationship with” – some think of God as an angry God; like a policemen, God who is waiting for us to make a mistake so he can get us. So not much room for a loving and forgiving God. That is certainly not the kind of God talks about in the



Gospels. The kind of God that is spoken about in the Gospels is loving, merciful, compassionate, the God is not only revealed in what He says but in what He does.

Now to our second question, if our answer is “yes”, then what we see in Jesus is the human expression of the divine heart and will and mind. When Jesus deals with someone, we are seeing in a human context the way God deal with us. The point is if Jesus is the divine son of God – as our tradition says He is – then He actually lets us into the secret of what God is actually like. This is really important because one of the fundamental questions of people who are reflecting on their decision to follow Jesus is “Do I know Him?” and “Do I believe in Him?”. How well do you know Jesus and how deeply do you trust Him?

Those who came with us to Poland for World Youth Day would remember how embedded in the Polish culture is the Divine Mercy culture. The image of the Divine Mercy is of Jesus with the rays coming from his hands with the inscription: “Jesus I trust in you”. I feel more comfortable with “Jesus I trust you” (removing the “in”). Without the “in” we would be closer to the truth.

Imagine what it means to say I trust you to someone. “Jesus I trust you.” Think what that means when I say that. It means I’m prepared to risk everything, I’m prepared to hand myself over to you, I am confident in giving myself to you. So how well do we know Him, and how truly do we trust Him?

Today we are celebrating Corpus Christi. John chapter six, where Jesus talks about himself as the Bread of Life. Read through it, it gets more explicit as it goes. Scholars will tell you the word he uses is for “chew”. “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood.” At the end of John’s Gospel, a whole lot of Jesus disciples stopped following Him because it was too much for them to follow. Jesus did not call him back, instead he turned to his closest disciples and asked them: “Are you going to walk away too?”. And Simon Peter on behalf of the group answered: “Lord, to who would we go to? You have the words of life.” Do we believe it?

When I first became a bishop, my motto was: “The one who lives in love, lives in God”. When I came to Perth, I took the opportunity to change it to three simple word “Via Veritas Vita” – “The Way, The Truth, The Life”. I want my time as Archbishop of Perth to be a time when I try to help us all focus on Him, put Him in the heart of everything. Because He says He is “the Way, Truth, and Life”. Is He? We have to ask ourselves. Can we trust Him? Can we take His word? We have to ask ourselves.

If we are going to be his disciples, we have to say: “We are going to walk in your way, we are going to commit ourselves and believe in your truth, and we are going to live the life that you give us. I’m not going to choose my own way, I’m going to follow your way, I’m not going to choose anything I believe in and change every five minutes if it doesn’t suit me, I’m going to commit myself to your truth, and I’m going to live the kind of life that comes to me from you as a



gift through my life of discipleship.” This is the importance of Jesus is, and why the question “Jesus Christ Divine Son of God, yes or no?” is so important.

What does following the way, and believing the truth, and living the life of Jesus look like in a society that is not particularly interested in knowing anything about Him? One of the things is its going to mean we are going to have to make choices that are very different than choices of a society that is following other philosophies, religious ideas, people or other moral values.

This leads me to the third part: “The Church as the body of Christ and the Sacrament of Salvation, yes or no?”. I want to give you a few scripture quotes to help us understand better. Some of it may be frightening and challenges but helps us to understand what the way, truth and Christ is.

Letter to Philippians: “You must have in you the same mind and heart that was in Christ Jesus”. Do you want to know what being a Christian looks like? It looks like someone who thinks the thoughts of Jesus, thinks the way Jesus thinks, whose attitudes are the same as Jesus, whose heart is the same as the heart of Jesus. This is what being a disciple of Jesus is.

We then go to the Gospels and uncover the mind of Jesus, the attitudes of Jesus and learn from Him how you should react in particular situations. That is a really important thing to do because a disciple of Jesus will be one who is doing his/her best to think the thoughts of Jesus, see with the eyes of Jesus, listen with the ears of Jesus, to speak with the voice of Jesus, and to love with the heart of Jesus. But it’s only by knowing the Jesus of the Gospels that we can work out how close or far we are from that ideal. Maybe you can see why I changed my motto to put Jesus at the heart of my mission and ministry here.

We have got to put Jesus back at the heart of our lives, and put him back at the heart of our Church. One of the challenges here is to have the courage to check whether or not my instincts are the instincts of Jesus. When I encounter someone that is not living the sort of life they should be living, what are my instincts? Should I get angry? Should I walk away in disgust? Then ask yourself, if I was trying to be like Jesus, would it look any different? How would I act?

Think about the story of Zacchaeus. He was a man who was despised and rejected and marginalised; a tax collector. He wanted to see Jesus, and when Jesus saw him, Jesus didn’t say to him: “you’re not doing the right thing, you are a bad person, etc”, instead he says: “Zacchaeus, come down, I’m coming to your house for tea”. Is that our instinct when someone challenges us because we think they are on the wrong path?

The point of that story is, a man who is despised has no chance of changing until he knows he is respected, accepted, and loved by someone. And Jesus accepts, respects, and loves. And before Jesus even has the chance to tell him anything, Zacchaeus tells Jesus: “If I’ve done anything wrong, I’m gonna fix it straight away”. The welcome of Jesus changed the man’s life,



before Jesus even said anything to him about change. These challenging and confronting stories should make us think and ask ourselves: “Do I really have the mind and heart of Jesus?”.

In Romans 12, St Paul writes to a small Christian community that was a pagan world at that time. “Adapt yourself no longer to the patterns of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed”.

We spend our lives adapting to the patterns of the present world in which we live, we drink in the values of our society in exactly the same way we breathe in the air we breathe we don’t consciously breathe in and out most of the time, and that is the same for the influence of our society.

We are immersed in a society and a way of looking at the world like it is second nature. If we were living in a heavily polluted city, we would be breathing in the polluted air and getting sick. If we live in a society whose values are not all that it should be, we would get sick. What St Paul is saying is “wake up”. Realise that this is the danger. “Adapt yourself no longer to the patterns of this present world but, let your minds be remade (how we do this is by getting to know Jesus), and your whole nature thus transformed.” And you will be able to discern the will of God; and you will know what is good, acceptable, and perfect.

But if you make your decision based on the patterns of the present world, there is a good chance that you won’t be following what is good, acceptable, and perfect – and heading in the other direction.

In the Gospel, a rich man asked Jesus: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”, Jesus said: “You must keep the commandments”. The young rich man replied: “I’ve kept all my commandments since my youth”, Jesus looked at him and loved him, saying: “There is one thing you lack, go sell all your belongings, give the money to the poor, and come follow me, you will have treasure in Heaven”. Then what I think are the saddest words in the Gospel tradition: “The man’s face fell, and he walked away sad, because he was a man of great wealth”.

What Jesus was asking was too much for the people because they had already built their lives on something else. That story is between two people. But the point of the story is not wealth, but it is about the thing that was stopping that person from following Jesus.

If Jesus came to you today, and you were to say: “Lord what do I have to do?” and if you say “I’ve tried hard and kept them all”, Jesus would look at you and love you, and say to you: “If you want to be perfect; for the rich man it was his money, what is it for you?”.

That’s a fundamental question for those who want to follow Jesus, and it’s a much tougher question when we live in a society who doesn’t support that kind of choice.



Lastly, how can we help each other to achieve it? I mentioned you can't do it on your own, and you're not supposed to do it on your own. In the letter of Philippians, St Paul gives us practical advice. He said: "Brothers and sisters, fill your minds with all that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we can love and honour, everything that can be thought virtuous and worthy of Christ".

Our society doesn't help us to fill our minds with those kinds of things, because so much of what it offers us through friends, social media, internet is the opposite. So ask ourselves: "If I were to take this advice serious, what might that mean?". Fill your minds with all that is good.

It is not a role of an archbishop to correct St Paul or correct anything, but another way to think of it. "Brothers and sisters, fill your lives with people that are true, people who are noble, people that are good and pure, people whom we can love and honour, and people who are virtuous and worthy of Christ." Fill your lives with those kinds of people, and be that kind of person that people like that need in their lives so that they can fill their lives with people like us.

Absolutely at the heart of our Christian understanding of what it is like to be human, in Genesis, there were two passages. The beautiful description of how God creates the world. The last thing He creates is humanity – male and female, and he says to them "be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth".

Before that, we are told that God created human beings in the divine image and likeness. It doesn't mean that God is male and female. This means, God is a God who gives life, a God who creates. We are made in the image and likeness of a life giving God, not a death dealing God. We can be the people we are supposed to be when we are bringers of life into each other's lives and we are the opposite of what God created us to be if we bring death into people's lives.

In the second story, God creates Adam and puts him in the Garden of Eden. He feels sorry for him, so he decides he needs to give Adam a helper – so He creates animals. Adam names them, but each time we are told that he did not find a helper suitable for him. He puts Adam to sleep, takes one of his ribs, and creates a woman, Eve. He wakes the man up. Adam says: "This at last is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh".

Then in the New Testament we see this extraordinary statement repeated by Jesus: "This is why a man leaves his father and mother, and clings to his wife, and the two become one." What this is telling us in both stories is that God creates us for each other. We are not isolated individuals who go around thinking: "As long as I behave myself, I will go straight to Heaven. I don't need to worry about anyone else".

We are made to be reliant on each other, we are made to depend on one another, we are made



to be mutually responsible for one another – this is built into the nature of God’s creation of us in His image. We need to help each other and we need to be look to each other and be able to trust each other to be the people God has created us to be.

So when we say “yes” to those three questions; it will be within the community of the Church, living together, supporting each other, forgiving each other when necessary, we will be able to gradually walk this path of discipleship.

From the book of Revelations: Jesus knocking at a door – “I am standing at your door knocking. If you open the door, and invite me in, I will sit down with you, and eat with you, and you with me”.

***Transcribed by the Archdiocese of Perth Communications Office.***