



**LifeLink Day 2019
Secondary Schools Launch**

Speech

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Archbishop of Perth**

Aranmore Catholic College, Leederville
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As you all know we are here for our annual LifeLink launch for our Catholic schools. A little later I will speak to you and so will Bishop Don about the work of our LifeLink agencies and why it is so important. We want to encourage you to become real leaders in your own schools and spearhead the efforts to raise the money we need to continue reaching out to all the people who depend on the work of these agencies.

But this morning also give me an opportunity to spend time with you, share some of my own thoughts and dreams with you, and give you a chance to share with me and Bishop Don some of your thoughts and dreams, your questions and your hopes for the Church.

Some of you have heard me say this before but I want to say it again to you all because it is the most basic thing I know about the Church - and after all simply by being a student or a staff member at a Catholic school you are a part of the Church and you have a right to know what the Church stands for, what it believes and teaches, and why it believes and teaches these things. I do realise that not all of you belong to the Catholic faith, or the wider Christian faith, and some of you are followers of other religions. I also realize that for many of you the question of faith is still an undecided one. I need to say at the start that I fully respect this. My intention is not to try and force anyone to believe what I believe, but simply to help all of you, no matter where you happen to stand on the question of religion at the moment, to have as good an understanding as possible of just why Catholic schools, just why your school exists.

As far as I am concerned it is all summed up in the title which Pope Francis gave to his set of reflections following the meeting of the world's bishops in Rome last year. He called them there, or at least a representative group of them, to discuss the importance of young people in the life and mission of the Church. The central topic was "Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment" but at the end, when the Pope came to write his reflections, he used a different title and it is on the screen; *Christus Vivit* - Christ is alive.

What you see on the screen are the opening words of Pope Francis's reflection. They capture the most essential thing about the Catholic Church and about Christianity in all its various forms. "Christ is alive - he is not just a great hero from the past but someone who lives today. This after all is what we celebrated just recently at Easter. How he is alive, and what it means for us that he is alive, is partly the question I want to address with you this morning.



The Catholic Church these days is under enormous scrutiny because of the terrible scandal of the sexual abuse of the young, and so it should be. But one of the things which makes this scandal so terrible is the unavoidable fact that it is such a shocking betrayal of everything the Church is supposed to stand for.

When I say that, of course, I am inviting all of us to ask the obvious question: what is the Church supposed to stand for? What is its purpose?

There is another way of asking this question, given that we believe as Catholics that the Church exists not because it was created by the first followers of Jesus, something they just dreamt up themselves, but because Jesus himself called it into existence. Why did God send Jesus in the first place and why did Jesus, in response to his mission from God, create the Church? And then the question which follows from that is this one: Why, in spite of the dreadful failures and scandals and betrayals of so many members of the Church, including its leaders, in the past and still in our own time, does God continue to care about the Church, and keep the Church going, and send people to renew the Church when it goes off the rails?

I don't want to pretend that these are easy questions to answer or even that there is only one answer, but I am convinced that at the heart of any satisfactory answer must be the conviction that the Church makes no sense at all, and has no purpose at all, and we might even say has no reason and no right to exist, or claim our loyalty, if it is not about being God's chosen place of encounter with Jesus Christ.

The next question then becomes, first of all, who is Jesus Christ and then, secondly, just what is the relationship between Jesus Christ and this thing which we call the Church? What I have always understood, and believe very strongly, is that knowing both about Jesus Christ and knowing Jesus Christ are absolutely essential to a full and happy life. Where does this kind of belief come from?

Well, in my case, it came first of all from the family I was born into, a Catholic family, with parents who believed that it was both their responsibility and their wish to my experience of being a member of the local parish in which I grew up, and it came from a growing sense, deep within me, that everything I was being taught at home, at school and in the parish, was actually true. This is a conviction that has never left me. In spite of the scandals, and the failures, and the ever-expanding discoveries about the nature of the universe and the challenges of living in a society which no longer is as open as it used to be to religious belief, I have never found a compelling reason to walk away from the Church or walk away from my belief in God and in Christ.

This I think is what is called quite simply the gift of faith. It comes to us, if it comes at all, in different ways, unique to each of us. The question of religious faith, and the power of religious faith, can come in unexpected ways and at unexpected times. My experience won't necessarily be yours. I grew up with faith as a key part of my life. Other people come to faith through some really tough experience, and this can happen at any stage of a person's life. The statistics show, for example, that after World War 11 there was a massive increase in Church attendance and monasteries and convents were overflowing with people who had experienced the horrors of war and now were seeking something to believe in, something to hope for and something worthwhile to which they



could dedicate their lives. For many people faith in God gave meaning to a life which had lost all meaning.

Up on the screen is an image of Jesus reaching out to Simon Peter who was in danger of drowning beneath the waves in a violent storm. You might remember the story... It was this same man, Simon Peter, who on another occasion, when so many people were deserting Jesus because his teachings seemed just too ridiculous to be believed, said to Jesus, when Jesus asked him if he too was going to walk away: *Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of life.*

So let me talk to you a little bit about faith and as I do you might be asking yourself, where do I stand in all this at the moment?

Faith is a tricky thing, a mysterious thing and I guess each one of us needs from time to time to ask ourselves if we actually have been given the gift of faith and if so where are we at with this gift. The Catholic tradition would teach us that the very fact that we have been baptised is God's guarantee that the gift of faith is there for us - but the Catholic tradition would also remind us that God's gifts are always given freely, need to be accepted freely, and need to be used with enthusiasm and integrity. And the gift of faith is a living thing, which can certainly grow but can also wither and die. And if this is true then it seems to me that one of the tasks given to us by God as a life project is to recognise, embrace, protect and nurture this gift when we become aware of it so that it can grow and develop in our lives and eventually, of course, come to full flower when we are united with God in heaven. Religious faith, and certainly Christian faith, is never just about how we live our lives now: it is about the ways in which the how of today will determine the how of the future, including our eternal future.

Over my lifetime I have come to understand that all of this is about God's generosity- God holds out to us an incredible future, and faith is the thing, the gift, which prepares us for that future, but in the end God respects our freedom - because without freedom, which itself is one of God's most important gifts to us, we are not really human beings at all - and because of this freedom God will never force himself upon us.

This is how I make sense of those parts of the scriptures which some people interpret as indicating that ultimately God is an angry and vengeful God. I don't believe that at all because that is not the God Jesus talks about, but when for example we come across a line in the New Testament like this one - it is a fearful thing, a terrible, awful thing, to fall into the hands of the living God - I would understand it to mean that it will be an awful, that is awe-filled, thing to fall into the hands of the living God, as we all will do at the moment of our death, but if we have allowed the gift of faith to grow within us it will not so much be awful as awesome. We will finally understand just how great, and how good, God is and our falling into God's hands will be like falling into the arms of someone we have been searching for and longing to find all our lives.

Faith, then, faith in Jesus, in the God of whom Jesus, we believe, is the living presence, and in the Church Jesus created and keeps in existence, has always seemed to me to be about trust. These days, whenever I talk about faith, or think about faith, or reflect on my own story of faith which now spans 65 years, I always add the adjective, either out loud or in my mind "trusting". Faith in this sense, trusting faith, is about much more than simply giving my intellectual assent to



some teaching, although it certainly does include that. Trusting faith is about moving forward each day trying to let myself be guided by the example, the teaching, the spirit and the very real presence in my life of Jesus as the one who walks with me and can be trusted, absolutely, with my life, my future, my well-being.

That's how I understand the quote up on the screen from one of the New Testament writings, the Letter to the Hebrews. I cannot see God but I trust that God is with me. I cannot see God but I trust that God cares for me. I cannot see God but I trust that God will walk with me in my times of peace, my times of turmoil, my times of challenge and suffering.

I don't know how you feel about this, or what sense you are making of what I am trying to say, but I can only tell you that this is how it is for me. And as I think about it, and reflect on it, it often occurs to me to ask myself, what is the alternative? If God does not exist, or if God does exist but does not care for me, and is not with me as I journey through life, and is not leading me to eternal life with him, then what ultimate sense does my life make? What is the point of the whole thing, of the struggles and sufferings I have to go through?

All of this leads me back to Jesus and helps me to understand just why he is so absolutely essential and central to my life and to the life of the Church. As Christians, and certainly within our Catholic tradition, we have an unshakeable belief that Jesus, far from being simply a very good and inspiring man, and perhaps even the best man who has ever lived, is actually all this and much more: he is the presence of God among us as one of us. We have a technical word for this in our theological language, what we might call "church-speak". The word is "incarnation". It comes to us in English via Latin and literally means "in the flesh".

What it is saying is that Jesus isn't just a man to whom God is especially close, or a man who is more open to God's presence in his life than anyone else has ever been. It is saying that but it is saying something much more radical and certainly much more mysterious and challenging. It is saying that this man Jesus is also God. According to the gospels, and it is especially clear in St John's gospel, this was exactly what Jesus understood about himself and said of himself. It is also what the earliest Christians believed about him.

In one of his letters St Paul says, "At the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven, on the earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father". To bend the knee, to genuflect, was and still is a gesture of humility before the greatness of God. It is why Catholics genuflect when they come into a church because of the presence of Jesus in the tabernacle. It is a recognition that Jesus is God. And in the world of the New Testament the word "Lord" was reserved to God. It is why St Thomas, when he finally meets the risen Jesus, cries out, "My Lord and my God".

There are two very big conclusions to be drawn if we Christians are right about this.

The first is that in Jesus we can see God in a way that we can understand. God becomes human in Jesus so that we can see him with our eyes, and hear him with our ears, and watch him going about the ordinary things of daily life, and the extraordinary things of his ministry and in all of that know the mind and heart of God.



Another way of saying the same thing is this: if you want to know what God is like have a look at Jesus, get to know Jesus, because in doing so you are getting to know God. You see God in what Jesus does and you hear God in what Jesus says.

Let me give you just one example of how we get to know something essential about God by listening to what Jesus says - remembering that Jesus, the divine Son of God, knows the truth of God from the inside if I can put it that way.

If in this story Jesus, who knows God from the inside, is telling us that the way this father treats his son is the way God treats us, then we should pay attention and believe him. And after all it is a pretty good message to hear, a pretty impressive insight into what God is actually like.

Jesus of course isn't all talk: he is a man of action. If what he says tells us the truth about God what we see him doing also tells us the truth about God.

If Jesus refuses to condemn this woman even though she is a sinner, and Jesus is God among us acting out his divinity in his human interactions with people, how good is this message of non- - condemnation? What does it say to each one of us in terms of our confidence about letting God into our lives?

So far I have spoken to you about the basic message of Pope Francis in his recent letter to young people; about his conviction, which is obviously absolutely at the centre of his own life and thought, that Christ is alive.

I have then tried to open up for us all some ideas about who this Christ is who the Pope insists is still alive today: that Christ is the presence of God among us, and that, when we see him in action we see, in a way which we can understand, a human way, how God acts.

But then, it seems to me the question becomes, "How is Christ still alive?"

This is where the Church comes in and where things can become a bit murky and confused. Given the failures of the Church over the last two thousand years, and still today, how are we supposed to believe that the Church is essential to our understanding of the ways in which Christ might still be alive, and present, and active, today?

Well, at the heart of this idea is exactly what I have been saying up until now. If Jesus really is the presence of God as a human being among us, and if we can therefore hear the words of God when we hear the words of Jesus, and see the action of God when we see Jesus in action, then we need to take Jesus seriously because not to take him seriously is not to take God seriously. And if you are not going to take God seriously then I guess that is much the same as saying you don't really believe in God anyway- and Christians are people who believe in God.

Because nearly everything we know about Jesus comes from the New Testament and mainly from the four Gospels, this is where we are going to hear about what Jesus said and what Jesus taught and what Jesus believed.



One of the things which becomes very clear as you read the Gospels, not in isolated little grabs but from beginning to end, is that Jesus, right from the start, wanted to gather a community of followers around him. These people were often described as his disciples: the word disciple means someone who has a teacher, a guide whom they listen to and follow.

From this large group of disciples, which must have changed often as some people joined and others walked away, Jesus chose an inner group who were always understood as the leaders of this new community, but only in the sense that their job was to help everyone else follow the one true leader, Jesus himself. There were twelve of these men, and they were usually called apostles. And then, from within that group Jesus chose one of them, Simon, to be the leader of the leaders if you like. In choosing Simon Jesus did an unusual thing: he changed Simon's name and called him Peter: Cephas in Hebrew and Petrus in Latin. Petrus, or Peter, comes from the Latin word for rock - and that's why you can see up on the screen the words of Jesus: You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.

If Jesus is God among us, and if his words are therefore God's words and his actions are therefore God's actions, then we can see that the community started up by Jesus is meant to have a group of leaders who themselves are also meant to have a leader. As Catholics we believe that the pope, whom we call the successor of Saint Peter, is the leader of God's Church on earth and the bishops, whom we call the successors of the apostles, are the group of leaders who, together with the Pope, are called to lead the Church - but always, remember, only so that all the disciples of Jesus, all of us, can follow Jesus who is our one true leader.

As you all know the Pope lives in Rome, in Vatican City, which is the smallest sovereign state in the world. At the heart of Vatican City is the Basilica of Saint Peter, and it is built where it is in Rome because it is in that exact place that Saint Peter, the first Pope, was martyred. At the time of Peter's death the Vatican hill was not in the centre of Rome at all but on the outskirts of the city. Among other things the Vatican Hill was used as a pagan cemetery, and because Peter was martyred there it was always believed that he had also been buried there.

That is why the basilica, still I think the largest Church in the world, was built there and why the Pope, for most of the last two thousand years, has lived there. But it was during World War II, when Pope Pius XII secretly gave permission for archaeologists to explore the pagan cemetery above which Saint Peter's Basilica was built, and they discovered what has been shown, pretty much beyond any reasonable doubt, to be the tomb of Saint Peter - in that tomb were found the remains of a middle-aged man of middle eastern origin who appeared to have had his feet cut off.

And of course, this fitted with the belief that Peter, who was going to be crucified like Jesus, asked to be crucified upside down because he did not think he was not worthy to die the same death as his Lord. When his executioners came to remove his dead body from the cross it would have been easier for them to simply cut the feet, which were nailed to the cross, from the rest of his body.

There is of course only one pope at any one time, although at the moment we also have a retired pope, Pope Benedict. There are, I think, about 5,000 bishops around the world. But there are over 1.2 billion Catholics in the world, which means that the bishops, together with the Pope, represent



a tiny minority of Catholics. And while there are is not what position you hold but how faithful you are; It is faithful Catholics, Catholics like many of you and like many of your parents and grandparents, who are the most important people in the Church. This is why Mary, the mother of Jesus, who wasn't a priest or a bishop but was the first and best disciple of Jesus, has a far more important place in the Church than anyone else, and is by far the best model for us to follow, after Jesus himself.

Most important thing Mary ever said: the Story of the miracle at Cana.... "Do whatever he tells you".

The role of the Pope and the bishops - to help us follow the advice of Mary. So the Pope and the bishops have a solemn duty to teach and guide and lead in fidelity to Jesus and to the Church which he called into being and which he keeps alive through the gift of his Holy Spirit.

What does Jesus tells us to do - and what does Jesus help us to do... in and through His Church?

This takes us back to where we started this morning and also takes us straight to the wonderful story of LifeLink.

Let's just listen to some of the things Jesus tells us to do:

He tell us to love one another as he has loved us - and how did he love us? By giving up everything for us, by giving his life for us.

He tells us that we should wash each other's feet - that is be servants of each other - because this is what he has done for us.

He tells us to give the hungry something to eat, and give the thirsty something to drink and look after the sick and care for the poor, because whenever we do we are actually, in reality, doing those things to him and for him.

He tells us to take risks if necessary to look after those in real need, just as the traveler did in the story of the Good Samaritan, who stopped to help a stranger who had been beaten and robbed, even though the traveler could not know whether or not the bandits were still around and might also attack him.

These are just some of the things Jesus is asking His disciples, His Church, to do. They are just some of the ways in which Jesus shows that he is still alive today, as Pope Francis said in his letter to young people. They are some of the ways in which you can judge whether or not you can really lay claim to being a Catholic. They also happen to be some of the ways through which we can all learn how to be better Catholics.

And all of this of course is what lies at the heart of LifeLink. I don't have to feed every hungry person myself - and of course I can't. I don't have to be the servant of every needy person in Perth, figuratively washing every single person's dirty feet - and of course I can't. But because I am part of the Church, part of this fantastic community which, when it is at its best, puts itself at



the service of those in any kind of need, I can play my part in equipping the people who, in my name, in our name, do the hard yards and get their hands dirty, by handing out the food, and giving shelter to the homeless, and sitting with the lonely and listening to them, and walking with the ones who have lost their way. This is what the people who work in all our LifeLink agencies do - they do it in our name, in the name of the Church, because they are doing it in Jesus' name and the Church is His Church.

Maybe it can all be summed up in two things Saint Mary McKillop, our first and so far only canonised Australian saint, used to say to the first group of women who joined her.

Never see a need without doing something about it. Never forget who it is you are following. When you put the two things together in a person's life you have a true disciple of Jesus. When you put the two things together in your school you have a true Catholic school.

Thank you