



Third Sunday of Easter Homily

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
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On last Friday evening at 6.00pm Perth time, Pope Francis released a document in Rome setting out his reflections following the recent meetings of bishops from around the world, called together to discuss the challenges facing marriage and the family today and how the Church, the Catholic community, might respond to these challenges.

I was interested to see that the Pope chose as the title for his document the phrase, "The Joy of Love". In doing so, I think he wanted to remind us that in the midst of all the challenges families face today, and the challenges which husbands and wives face in their day to day lives, it is love which will help us all make sense of the moments of difficulty, of disappointment and of failure, as well as the moments of great joy and happiness. It is love which will bring joy to us and to our families.

If you read the Pope's document, and I would encourage you all to do so (it is readily available on the internet) you will see that the Pope is not ignoring or down-playing the reality of married and family life today. He knows it can be difficult at times, and that there are no perfect marriages or perfect families. He knows that the ideal of marriage and family, proclaimed by the Church in fidelity to the Lord, is not easy to achieve. One of the inspiring things about the Pope's reflections, is his calm acceptance of the reality of marriage and family life. It is almost as if he is saying to us that even though none of us is perfect yet, and all of our relationships are less than they could be, the Christian ideal of marriage and family should not discourage us because we are so far away from it. Rather, it should inspire us because as we patiently work our way towards it, relying on the help of God's grace, we will find our lives enriched by our commitment to the journey towards the ideal.

It is precisely because our relationships with others, and often especially with the members of our families who are the people closest to us, are less than perfect that the Pope, both in this document and in all his reflections on this Jubilee Year of Mercy, places forgiveness at the heart of everything. The more we are able to forgive, generously and compassionately, and the more we are able to seek forgiveness from those we have hurt or betrayed, the more we will experience the gift of peace which as we know is the Lord's Easter gift to us.

This quality of forgiveness comes through very strongly in today's gospel. We might even say that Jesus models for us what true forgiveness really looks like. This is the last story in Saint John's Gospel and in that sense might be thought of as a summing up of all that Jesus came to teach us. In a way it is like his parting gift to his disciples, and of course also to us.



In the final part of the story, our attention is focused on the private encounter between Jesus and Peter. Jesus has called Peter aside and asks him three times if he loves him. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?" "Yes, Lord", says Peter, "You know that I do." Jesus asks him a second time and Peter gives the same answer. And then, for the third time, Jesus asks him again. Peter is upset and bursts out, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." After each response Jesus confirms that he believes Peter by giving him a task: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. And then, to sum it all up, Jesus simply says, "Follow me".

As we read or listen to this story, and hear Jesus repeat this very personal and very direct question three times, we can't help but remember that, just a few days previously, this same Peter had three times loudly denied that he even knew who Jesus was and firmly insisted that he was not a follower or disciple, of Jesus. At the time of Jesus' greatest need, when he was totally abandoned by everyone and left to his terrible fate, Peter could not find the courage to stand by him.

Such a betrayal is hard to forgive - and yet this is exactly what Jesus does in today's Gospel. In spite of Peter's terrible failure Jesus still wished to trust him with the leadership of the new community of disciples. But Jesus knew that Peter would not have the courage to lead others if he remained burdened by the guilt of his betrayal. And so, three times, Jesus asks Peter about the depth of his love, and in doing so gives Peter three precious opportunities to put his three betrayals, his three acts of cowardice, behind him.

Not only is the forgiveness of Jesus generous and total - it is also full of compassion, determined to help Peter move forward with hope and courage. And that is exactly what Peter does. He accepts the leadership of the community, he becomes a bold and fearless preacher of the message of Jesus, and in the end he gives his life for his Lord, whom he really has learnt to love with all his heart.

This is the kind of forgiveness which Jesus offers each one of us - and because we are trying to be his disciples it is the kind of forgiveness he can help us to offer each other, if we let him.

In reminding us of the high ideals of Christian marriage and family life, and in recognising at the same time the struggles we all experience in living up to these ideals, Pope Francis is inviting us to ask the Lord to shape our minds and hearts so that we can learn to forgive as Jesus did, with the same generosity, the same compassion and the same largeness of heart. Let us ask the Lord for this precious gift today, for ourselves, for our families, for our friends, and for our brothers and sisters in the community of the Church.