



2018 Archdiocesan Agencies Mass

Homily

**By the Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
Thursday 26 July 2018

The words which we find on the front cover of today's Mass booklet - *understand with your heart, listen with your ears* - which we have just heard in the gospel reading, bring to my mind the opening words of the Rule of Saint Benedict: *Listen with the ears of your heart*. Saint Benedict of course has borrowed and adapted these words from the Book of Proverbs. It is worth considering for a moment the longer passage from Proverbs from which these words come: it offers us, who have chosen quite deliberately to work within the context of the Catholic Church and its ministries, a practical guide as to how we should conduct ourselves as proclaimers of the gospel – for that is what we are, each in our own particular context.

For me at least it is helpful to regard these words from Proverbs as addressed to me personally from the Lord:

My child, pay attention to what I say; turn your ear to my words.
Do not let them out of your sight; keep them within your heart;
for they are life to those who find them and health to one's whole body.
Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.
Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips.
Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you.
Give careful thought to the paths for your feet; and be steadfast in all your ways.
Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil. (Prov 4:20-27)

As we gather for our annual Mass this morning, and in the light of these beautiful words I am particularly conscious that we find ourselves living through a time of great challenge, but also great promise, for the Church. The horrors unmasked by the Royal Commission, and the extent to which so many in the Church, and especially some of its leaders, have compromised and disfigured our fidelity to the gospel of Christ, have inevitably brought great suffering to so many innocent people. This is first of all true, of course, of the survivors of sexual abuse and their families, who must continue to be at the heart of our prayers and of our practical determination to do whatever we can to bring some peace and wholeness to them. It is also true, in different ways, for all Catholics and so many other people who had presumed that the members of the Church,



and especially its leaders, could reasonably have been expected to be living basically faithful lives of Christian discipleship.

The Royal Commission has posed some difficult and uncomfortable questions for us as a Church. For me they all converge into one deeply disturbing set of questions: how could this possibly have happened? How did we manage to veer away so disastrously from those things which are at the heart of our faith? How is it possible that people who publically professed their commitment to Christ, and dared to preach him to others, could so blatantly betray him, or so comprehensively turn their backs on him?

In asking these questions I am not for a moment suggesting that all the particular issues raised by the Royal Commission do not need to be carefully considered. Of course they must be. What I do believe, however, is that the terrible story of sexual abuse in our Church indicates a deep malaise within our Church, just as I believe that the widespread prevalence of sexual abuse throughout so many institutions in our society, including the most important institution of all, the family, points to a malign cancer at the heart of our society which should alarm us all.

All Catholics, and perhaps in a special way all those who choose to work in and for the Church, are being called at this particular time to have the courage to recognize how *hopelessly inadequate*, to borrow some words from St John Paul II, our witness to the gospel has been. For Pope John Paul, the explanation for this hopeless inadequacy was quite simple: we have failed to contemplate the face of Christ. We have failed to realize that unless the Church, deliberately and consciously and intentionally, refers everything it seeks to do and be to him, we will never even come close to being the Church, the community of disciples, that Christ is calling us to be. If we try to build the house, which is God's Church, on shifting sands, rather than on the solid rock of Christ who is the only foundation for the Church, then the fabric of the Church will continue to unravel, to the shame and dismay of us all.

At this time in our history, then, the question we must all have the courage to ask and try to answer is this: What do I think God is asking of us at this time? What do we think God is asking of us at this time? This of course is the question posed by the Plenary Council. The very fact that we are sincerely asking this question, and seeking to be open to a careful listening to the wide variety of answers that will be offered, is the source of that sense of great promise for the Church that accompanies the many challenges we are facing. But as we ask this question of ourselves as individuals, as members of Catholic parishes and other communities, and as collaborators in the Church's mission, as all of us in the Cathedral today are, we must listen, not just to each other, but to the God who is speaking in and through each other, and in so many other ways as well. For we are not being asked what we want for the Church – we are being asked what we have discerned God wants for the Church. They may of course be the same thing, but equally they may not be.



And so, as Proverbs encourages us, we must turn our ear to the Lord's words and keep them within our hearts for they are life and health to those who find them. We must give careful thought to the paths we choose to follow, let our eyes look straight ahead, and above all else guard our hearts, for everything we do will flow from there. And in all things, in order to make sure that our witness does not prove to be hopelessly inadequate, as it has been so often in the past, we must contemplate the face of Christ, for without him we can do and be nothing.