



2013 Christmas Homily

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
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Just a few days ago, at about seven o'clock in the evening, I went for a walk through the city. As you would expect there was a great sense of energy and life everywhere. The cafes and bars were full of people talking, laughing and celebrating and of course the shops were very busy with people obviously looking for gifts for their family and friends. Christmas Carols could be heard coming from some of the shops and buskers were in the mall entertaining the passers-by. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. It was good to see.

We often find the greeting "merry Christmas" on our lips at this time of the year and it was clear that this was exactly what so many people were experiencing on that warm evening last week. It is important that we celebrate at this time of the year and important too to express our gratitude to those who are a part of our lives and who enrich us with their friendship and love.

As I was walking back to the Cathedral reflecting on what I had seen I found myself remembering something my parents said to me when I was just a little boy. I grew up in a very good Catholic family but we weren't encouraged to make too public a display of our religion. Nevertheless mum and dad insisted that rather than wish people a "merry Christmas" we should wish people a "happy Christmas". As I grew older I realised that there was nothing wrong, and indeed a lot right, with wishing "merry Christmas" to family and friends, and even strangers. We certainly celebrated Christmas well in our family, merrily you might say, with good food and drink and good friends. But I also realised mum and dad were trying to help me see that in a certain sense being merry is something that often happens just on the surface of our lives, while Christmas is about more than just the surface things – it is also about the deeper things. Happiness, if it is real, is about more than having a good time, or putting aside our troubles and worries for a little while, although that is certainly worth doing. Happiness is about a deep conviction that, no matter what struggles or difficulties we face, our lives rest on something solid, something trustworthy, which will support us when things are going well and when things are going badly.

Another word for this is joy, and it is no accident that one of our favourite Christmas carols is "Joy to the World". Who knows – we may even sing it tonight. Being merry and celebrating is good – but being deeply happy and joyful is better still.

There is a beautiful phrase in one of the psalms from the Old Testament which poses an important question and offers an even more important answer. The question is put like this: *What can bring us happiness, many say? We may not have asked this question of ourselves in such a direct way but most of us spend much of our lives searching for happiness – and often, when we think we have found it, it slips away from us or gets overwhelmed by difficulties, disappointments and sadness. That our happiness can be so easily lost or diminished means*



that perhaps we have been looking in the wrong places. The things we think will bring us happiness in fact often bring the opposite.

The writer of the psalm knew this and so offers a different answer. It is an answer expressed in a prayer: *Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord.* In one of the Scripture readings we use at Christmas time we are told that *“the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. On those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone”*. We might express it differently by saying *“the people who searched for happiness but never really found it have gazed on the face of the child lying in the manger and their hearts are being healed.”*

This is the message of Christmas and the ultimate explanation for that sense of hope that seems to capture most people, religious or not, at this time. God has come among us in the child born at Bethlehem in order to make himself known as a God of love, a God of peace, a God of forgiveness and a God of life rich, full and overflowing. And while we will certainly meet this God here in the Cathedral and in Churches everywhere, that he was first seen as a tiny child in a humble stable reminds us that God can be encountered anywhere, even in the most simple, the most ordinary, and often the most unlikely of places. He wants to meet us where we are, and in doing so wants to offer us his Christmas gift – the gift of real happiness, the gift of joy, the gift of deep peace and sustaining hope. This is what tonight Mass is about: this is the invitation. Recognise God with you here in this Mass and make him welcome so that you will recognise him with you in all the circumstances of your life and make him welcome there as well. Let the light of his face, revealed in the child born in Bethlehem, shine on you.

On behalf of everyone here at St Mary’s Cathedral may I wish you and all your family and friends a “merry Christmas” yes, but much more a very happy, holy and joyful Christmas. May God bless you all.