



Feast of the Epiphany

Homily

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Archbishop of Perth**

**Sunday 5 January, 2020
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

When I became the Archbishop of Perth in 2012 I asked Jacinta, our Director of Music here in the Cathedral, to include the hymn "*Christ be our Light*" in the liturgy. I did so because of my conviction at the time, a conviction which has not changed, that the way forward for the Church, not just here in our Archdiocese, but right across our country and across the world, is to do everything we can to ensure that Jesus Christ is absolutely at the centre of everything we do and say and believe.

As I have noted on many occasions, the place of Jesus at the very heart of the Church has always been certain in theory but I believe very strongly that this is not always true in practice. Sadly, it is not always true in my own life as a Christian, nor in my own life and ministry as a Bishop. Again sadly, is not always true in the life of the Church here in Perth or more widely in Australia or around the world. Often as individuals and as communities we struggle to remember who we really are and who it is that we follow.

As Pope Francis remarked when he reflected last year on the feast we are celebrating today we do not always know or understand Jesus as well as we might think we do. We know in our heads that when God sent his Son to reveal His face to us He sent him to an insignificant young woman and her future husband rather than to a wealthy and influential family. Jesus was not born in comfort and security but in poverty and uncertainty. His birth was announced by angels, it is true, but those angels spoke only to the shepherds who were the least important and often most despised of people in the community. The wise men, whose coming to visit the newborn king we celebrate this morning, had to learn the hard way that this king would not be found in a palace or in the halls of power but rather in a humble stable. We know all this of course. We are all familiar with the gospel stories of the birth of Jesus and at this time of the year we sing Christmas carols which put these stories into music and song. I wonder sometimes, though, if we really ever stop to think deeply about the significance of the way, the strange way, the unexpected way, in which God enters into the story of humanity and makes Himself known by becoming one of us, one with us.

Pope Francis, in his reflections on the Feast of the Epiphany, points out for us that the reason why God comes in the way He does rather than in the way of worldly power and influence is because God wishes to offer us the wonderful gift of salvation from our sins and fullness of life but does not seek to impose it on us. God always respects our freedom, that precious gift which distinguishes us from all other creatures God has made on earth, because in God's love for us God wants us to respond freely to Him and give ourselves to Him in gratitude and joy rather than



to be forced into some kind of acceptance of God in our lives through coercion or fear or the exercise of naked power.

In profound continuity with the teaching of Pope Benedict and before him of Pope Saint John Paul II, Pope Francis reminds us often that God offers Himself to us, proposes Jesus to us, as the way for us to follow, the truth upon which to build our future, and the source of that life which can enrich our own lives and allow us to live them to the full. The challenge for us, of course, is that the world in which we live, and its values which we often take in as easily and unconsciously as the air we breathe, constantly suggest to us that there is a better way than the way of Jesus, a different truth to that of Jesus or perhaps no real solid truth at all, and a better life lived in a very different way to that proposed to us by Jesus.

Often without realising it our day-to-day decisions are determined more by these values than by the values we profess as Christians. Indeed, sometimes we just presume that there is no conflict between the values of Jesus and the values of the society in which we live. And when this happens it can begin to influence the way we think of the Church herself and what we believe the Church should be doing. We no longer allow the Lord through his Church to be a challenge to the values of our society: rather we can begin to judge the Church because it is not in harmony with the values of our society, forgetting that our society, for all its many beautiful and positive aspects, does not begin from the premise that the way of Jesus is the foundation for truly human living. Perhaps, like the wise men who were following the star and who did have hearts open to God's call, but who nevertheless presumed without thinking that the newborn king would be found in the palaces of the rich and powerful, we too have to be prepared for God to lead us to places we do not expect, to places that initially at least seem strange and foreign and unwelcome to us, to places that will help us understand that God's call to us is often very different to the call of our society.

I hope we continue to sing the hymn "*Christ be Our Light*" here in this cathedral and across the Archdiocese but I hope too that in singing this hymn, in praying this prayer, in expressing this wish, we realise and accept and embrace the challenge that if we do allow Christ to be our light then the way we deal with each other in our families, among our friends, in the Church, in our wider society and in every aspect of our lives may begin to look very different.

This, I believe, is the challenge of the Feast of the Epiphany: to be as open as the wise men were to follow the guidance of the star and to be ready for that star, that light, to lead us to places we do not expect, to values we have not yet fully embraced, to actions that up until now we have been reluctant to take: that this star will lead us to Christ and that in offering him the gift of our lives, we will finally be set free to be the people God has created us to be.