



## **Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year A)**

### **Homily**

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Archbishop of Perth**

**Sunday 17 May, 2020  
Cathedral Presbytery, Perth**

One of the common themes which keep occurring in the readings we use at Mass between Easter and Pentecost, is that of what we might call the presence and absence of Jesus. The death of Jesus on the cross was the worst experience of the absence of Jesus for his disciples. The one they had loved and trusted, and in whom they had placed all their hopes, was dead – and so in a sense were their hopes, their dreams and their faith. That first Holy Saturday, the day after Jesus's death, must have been one of dreadful emptiness for them all.

The events of Easter Sunday restored their hopes and their faith, but as we know from the Gospel stories they at first struggled to believe that Jesus had really risen, they often did not recognise Jesus even when he was with them, and at first, as they did come to believe, they wanted to cling on to Jesus as if he had returned to them to resume his normal life with them. Only gradually did they come to understand what he had meant when he said to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection, *“Do not cling to me because I have not yet ascended to my Father”*. Jesus would leave them again – we will celebrate the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord next week – but he would then be with them in a new way through the gift of his Holy Spirit, just as he was with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in a new way, in the breaking of the Bread, the Eucharist, even as he disappeared physically from their sight.

This theme of the presence and absence of Jesus, which is in some ways something we are all experiencing while it is still not possible for our churches to be fully opened, is also found in today's Gospel. The setting is the night of the Last Supper and Jesus is preparing his disciples, both for the horrors of the next few days but also for the challenges, presently unimaginable to them, which they would have to face as, after his resurrection and his short time with them, he returned to his Father and the work of his Body, the Church, would really begin.

The opening words of Jesus this morning would have been a challenge to those disciples and they are a challenge to us. *“If you love me ....”* The very presence of the disciples with Jesus on that painful night showed that they did indeed love him – or at least wanted to and were trying to, just as our presence at Mass hopefully shows the same thing. But Jesus goes on to finish the sentence: *“If you love me you will keep my commandments.”* In other words, it is not enough to



say we love him or even want to be with him – we need to show our love in action by really allowing him to be the Way, the Truth and the Life he assures us he is. To keep his commandments means precisely this: to let him be the way we follow; to let him be the truth to which we commit ourselves; to let him be the life which inspires and guides our own lives. In another part of the Gospel tradition Jesus puts it this way: *“It is not those who say to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven”* (Matt 7:21).

Christianity would be a much more comfortable religion if we could take these two saying of Jesus, put them together, and then leave out the middle part. Then we would have something like this: *“If you love me... you will one day be with my Father who is in heaven”*. This would leave us free to decide for ourselves what loving Jesus involves. We could leave out the challenges with which we struggle, the parts of Jesus’ teaching which constantly test us, the commandments he puts before us, and content ourselves instead with a Jesus whom we have created for ourselves rather than the true Jesus of the Gospels who asks extraordinary things of us: to love our enemies; to forgive endlessly and wholeheartedly; to love one another as Jesus has loved us; to be perfect as God our heavenly Father is perfect.

The call of Jesus to us is daunting: if we do not experience it that way, then perhaps we have never really listened. But fortunately, Jesus does not present us with these high ideals and then leave us alone to struggle to reach them, and inevitably fail. *“No”* he says, *“Even though I am returning to my Father I will ask him to give you another Advocate, (another supporter and helper, another champion) who will be with you forever.”* This is the same promise made to Mary when she was, at the very beginning of the Gospel story, overwhelmed by what God was asking of her.

In the face of her confusion and doubt the Angel Gabriel spoke these words: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow”* (Luke 1:35). It is as if the angel were saying to her, *“There is no need to be afraid. God will not leave you alone as you seek to respond to his call. Through the power of his Holy Spirit he will be with you to accompany you and strengthen you. What you cannot do on your own you will be able to do as long as you remain united to him”*

It was Mary’s hearing and believing of these words, and their fulfilment in her life, which enabled her to give her “yes” to God in trusting faith. Her love for her Son Jesus was indeed expressed in her life-long fidelity to him, even to the point of standing at the foot of his cross as his own love for us was also demonstrated so clearly.

The gift of the Holy Spirit which Jesus promised in today’s Gospel, the gift which Mary received with such trusting faith, the gift we will recall and celebrate in two weeks’ time at Pentecost, is a gift we have already been given at our Baptism and at our Confirmation. It is a gift of power – the power to live as Jesus lived and to love as Jesus loved. It is a gift, a power, upon which we can



call at any time. Perhaps more so now than at other times it is gift we really need to embrace as we confront all the challenges, big and small, which the COVID-19 pandemic puts before us.

Yes, God does ask great things of us and he constantly calls to us to keep walking along the path of fidelity. Fortunately, God is also our Good Shepherd. If we go astray he goes looking for us until he finds us and then he brings us home. If we get tired and dispirited, he lifts us on his shoulders and carries us along. Just as the angel said to Mary so the Lord says to us, *“There is no need to be afraid, I am with you – so have courage, for I have called you by your name and you are mine.”*