



Easter Vigil & Easter Sunday

Homily

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**3 and 4 April 2021
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

Last year, this Easter (vigil or morning) Mass was celebrated here in the Cathedral, not with a large crowd of happy people and a magnificent choir and musicians, but in an empty Cathedral with me staring into cameras as we all tried to find ways to manage the challenges presented to us by the Covid-19 lockdown. This year we must give thanks to God that in his providence we here in Western Australia find ourselves in a much better position. At the same time, we are conscious of, and pray for, our Christian sisters and brothers around the world whose ability to gather as communities of faith to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord is still very restricted.

In a strange kind of way this experience of the pandemic mirrors the experience of God's Chosen People whose deliverance from slavery in Egypt led to a forty-year period of wandering in the desert before God finally led them to the Promised Land. It is that deliverance from slavery which the Jewish people celebrate at the annual festival of Passover, and it was, of course, at the celebration of the Jewish Passover that Jesus gave us the gift of himself in the Eucharist. Instead of sacrificing a lamb, as the Jewish tradition did, Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross, offering himself to his Father. In the Eucharist he invites us to let him unite us to himself through receiving his body and blood, so that we too, together with him, offer ourselves to the Father. In Jesus we celebrate a new kind of freedom, not from physical slavery but from all those things which hold us back from being the people God has created us to be.

When we reflect on the suffering and death of Jesus, as we have done again in these last few days, we often focus on the terrible injustice done to Jesus, an innocent man whose utter goodness was so confronting to those who opposed him that they were determined to destroy him. We marvel at Jesus's fidelity, his self-sacrifice and his total commitment to the will of his Father. But we can also be overwhelmed as we realise how far we are from showing these same qualities in our daily lives. As we recognise our own infidelities, our selfishness and our inconsistencies, how can we ever hope to follow such an example?

There is another way of thinking of the suffering and death of Jesus; one with which we might more easily identify.



As Jesus was dying on the cross some of his opponents taunted him. *“He saved others; he cannot save himself,”* they said. *“If he is the King of Israel, let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.”* These cruel words, flung in hatred at a dying man, testify to what almost everyone that terrible day must have been thinking. *This man, in spite of his amazing deeds and beautiful words was, in the end, a dreadful failure. All his promises, all his high ideals, have come to nothing.* The very words of Jesus himself, as the Gospel of St Mark records them, point in the same direction. *“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”*

Jesus knew what it was to fail: he failed to win over the hard-hearted religious leaders of his time; he failed to keep Judas from the disaster of betrayal; he failed to instil in most of his disciples enough courage to stand with him at his darkest hour; he failed to stiffen the spine of Peter, his chosen leader, to remain true to him when challenged at the time of Jesus’s arrest; he went to his death with the agonising thought that God had abandoned him.

What all this means is that when we fail, and every one of us does, sometimes in small and hidden ways but sometimes in public and humiliating, even spectacular ways, Jesus comes to join us there because he knows what it means. Jesus is no stranger to the searing disappointment of failure, and we can turn to him in such moments and rely on him to help us. Most of all we can ask him to keep alive in us that glimmer of hope and faith whispering to us that the experience of failure, painful though it is, does not mean the end of everything. If Jesus cried out, from the cross, *“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me”*, he also entered through the gates of death with a prayer of trusting faith on his lips: *“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”*.

Through the seeming finality of a shameful and agonising death, Jesus emerged triumphant into the fullness of life. If he wants to join us in our failure, and stand with us there, it is because he wants to strengthen us for the time when God will bring us into a new life, a new beginning. Jesus carried the wounds of his terrible death in his risen body and we, too, will inevitably carry the wounds of our failures into whatever God has in mind for us. But the wounds will become a sign, not of shame but of God’s grace-filled victory, in us, over that shame, and our sin.

Jesus is risen, he is alive, and he passionately desires to draw us into communion with him so that we too can experience the joy and the reality of his resurrection. This is what Easter really means. Alleluia!