



Catholic Education Commissioning Mass

Homily

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Archbishop of Perth**

**Thursday 28 January 2021
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

As a general rule I would not normally, at the start of a homily, ask questions and look for some kind of response from the congregation. However, this afternoon I would like to make a small exception by asking all those who are teachers, and I would, some might think surprisingly, include principals in this category, to put your hands up. Thank you. And now, without wishing to embarrass anybody, I would invite all those here who are fathers to put your hands up. Thank you - hands down.

I wonder what all of you who did put your hands up make of this afternoon's gospel reading where Jesus says very clearly that we should never call someone our father and we should never allow ourselves to be called teachers.

Just as an aside, this Gospel passage is a good example of why we need to be careful in our interpretation of Scripture and also why we, as Catholics, are very fortunate to have a teaching authority which can guide us in our interpretation of the Scriptures. Often, of course, the correct interpretation of a Scriptural text is quite obvious. No one, for example, would take Jesus literally, although I hope we would take him seriously, when he says that if your tongue causes you to sin you must cut it out and if your hand causes you to sin you must chop it off. We instinctively understand the nature of this kind of language and recognise that on this occasion what Jesus is really doing is stressing the gravity of sin and the damage it causes, and the lengths, therefore, to which we should go to avoid falling into sin. On other occasions the very graphic language of Jesus is taken literally by Christians or at least by those in the Catholic tradition. When Jesus says, "*My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink*", we understand Jesus to be speaking of the gift of himself in the Eucharist where we do indeed eat his body and drink his blood, under the outward appearances of bread and wine. It is the long history of the Church, and the accumulated wisdom of the Church, as well as our belief in the Lord's promise to animate the Church through the gift of his Holy Spirit, that we can be confident of the true and deepest meaning of the Scriptural texts we read, because we read them within the context of the Church's faith.

The words of Jesus in this afternoon's Gospel invite us to look beyond their surface and literal meaning to a much deeper truth which is, in fact, vitally important both for those who are fathers



and those who are teachers. True fatherhood, genuine fatherhood, will inevitably be a reflection of the fatherhood of God. And the fatherhood of God is not about the maleness of God – these are human, not divine qualities - but rather about the capacity, and the passionate desire, of a true father to be a life giver, to be a life affirmer, to be, in other words, a source of life for others. Jesus tells us we should call no one on earth our father for we have only one father who is in heaven, because we do in fact call people fathers, as Jesus well knew and knows, we might more profitably say that we only recognise fatherhood as genuine and noble when it is a reflection of the fatherhood of God.

And so it is with teachers and, by extension, with anyone who is engaged in the task of forming and educating children and young people. We should call no one on earth a teacher, says Jesus, nor allow others to call us teachers, because we have only one teacher and that teacher is Christ, who himself tells us that he is the Way, and the Truth and the Life. Or, again, perhaps we should rather say, because we have looked beyond the surface of Jesus' words to their deeper meaning, that we only recognise a genuine and trustworthy and reliable teacher, and especially one who has accepted a position in a Catholic school, when he or she is a reflection of and witness to Christ, for it is Christ who seeks, through teachers, to form and shape and lead young people into the fullness of life.

We believe that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God and that, in a very real sense, the journey of life is a journey into an ever deeper living out of this fundamental truth. As teachers, as educators, as those engaged in the education of the young in any way, we know that we are the first collaborators with the parents who send their children to us in the formation and in the journey of maturation of young people as they prepare for life both while they are at school and, much more importantly, for the life which awaits them beyond their school years. What an incredible privilege this is, and what an enormous responsibility it is. We know that it is the parents who entrust their children to us and we act, or should act, accordingly. But perhaps we don't reflect enough upon the truth that it is also God who entrusts his children to us and that therefore we should act accordingly knowing that these children belong to God. Just as we must give an account of ourselves to the parents of the children we teach and shape, so too must we give an account to God.

We do not need to be afraid of this responsibility or intimidated by it. It is God who is calling us to this task and it is God who will enable us to be faithful to it. At the start of this new school year, then, I would invite all of us here to make this Mass a time for asking the Lord to bless and strengthen us so that we can be found worthy of the trust he is placing in us.