



Fourth Sunday of Lent Year B

Homily

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Archbishop of Perth**

**14 March 2021
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

As we move closer to the annual celebration of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, the liturgy invites us already, on this fourth Sunday of Lent, to begin to reflect on the deeper meaning of the shocking events of Holy Week culminating in the brutal death of Jesus and yet, in a much truer sense, culminating in his resurrection from the dead.

In this morning's gospel, when Jesus tells Nicodemus, one of the good Pharisees, (and, of course, there were many of them) that he, Jesus, must be lifted up, he reminds Nicodemus of that strange story in the Old Testament where the Chosen People were afflicted by a plague of deadly serpents. This plague was understood by the people to be a punishment from God because of their infidelity. When Moses pleads for his people, confidently because he knows that God is a God of mercy and compassion, God tells Moses to have a brass serpent made and placed on a rod which can be lifted high above the people so that they might deliberately turn their gaze to that bronze serpent in sorrow for their sins and be spared from death.

Identifying himself with this story of Moses, one of the most important figures in Jewish history, Jesus insists that he, too, must be lifted up like that bronze serpent so that all might turn their gaze to him in recognition of their need for salvation and entrust themselves to him.

The word Jesus uses for being lifted up can mean, in Greek (which is the language of the gospels), lifted up physically but also exulted, glorified and honoured. Jesus uses this word deliberately because he wants to sow a seed in the mind of Nicodemus, and in the minds of his disciples, that will come to flower once they have begun to understand the great mystery of his passion, death and resurrection. Only in faith and because of the resurrection will the disciples be led to see that the shame and horror and degradation of the crucifixion of Jesus, when he is lifted up for all the world to see, is at the very same time the moment of his exultation and glorification. And why? Because, as Jesus says in today's gospel, God loved the world so much that he gave us his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life.

This is the very heart of the mystery of our faith. God loves us. That we exist at all is because God loves us. That we have been given the gift of faith through our belonging to the Lord's Church is because God loves us. That we are here this morning trying our best to be faithful to God in



the midst of all the challenges, difficulties, doubts and failings which are a part of all our lives is because God loves us. That no matter what we may have done in the past we may still come before God in honesty and sorrow knowing that he will forgive us is because God loves us. And how do we know this? Because God sends his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life.

It seems to me that our Catholic faith, our beautiful, challenging Catholic faith, will never really make sense to us, and will never be that source of life and joy and freedom and hope which God intends it to be, until we have really begun to believe in the depths of our heart that God loves us. If God's love for us, and our response of love to God, is not the driving impulse of the way we live our lives of faith, then our faith may end up being a burden to us and little more than a set of rules or regulations or obligations which only seem to oppress us and limit our freedom. This is the very opposite of what our life of faith within the Church is meant to be. *"I have come,"* said Jesus, *"that you might have life and have it to the full"*. This is the very gift that is offered to us through the Church but it is a gift which will only really flower in our lives once we understand that at the heart of everything to do within the Church is this conviction that God loves us.

"Those who live by the truth come out into the light," says Jesus in this morning's gospel, *"so that it can be plainly seen that what they do is done in God"*.

If what we do, if the way we live our lives, is not consciously centred in God then our faith will never be the light that God wants it to be for us. So, perhaps, this morning we might just carry with us in our minds and in our hearts as we leave the cathedral at the end of Mass three simple words: *God loves us*.