



Healing Mass

Homily by the Most Rev Tim Costelloe SDB, Archbishop of Perth
Sunday, 3 May, 2015 – St Mary's Cathedral, Perth

[Readings: Acts 9:26-31; Psalm 22; 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8]

"You have made us for yourself O God and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

These words of Saint Augustine have always spoken very powerfully to me. They have helped me to understand the yearnings I often detect within me for a deeper sense of purpose and of peace. They have helped me, too, to work my way through those moments of confusion and doubt and fear which, like all of us, I experience from time to time.

They are words which I hope might also bring comfort to those among us this morning who are suffering in any way. Especially, because we are turning our minds and hearts today to our brothers and sisters who are battling serious ill health, I hope that all of us in our times of crisis, of loneliness, of pain and ill health, might allow these words to remind us of something Jesus himself said to his frightened disciples: *do not be afraid, have courage, for I am with you.*

It is not always easy to understand why suffering and illness must be a part of our lives. At times we might be tempted to think that God is punishing us, or that he has withdrawn his love from us. We might even think that he has deserted us completely or that we no longer matter to him. Suffering and illness are in fact for many people a great challenge to their faith. At such times it might be helpful to remember that another word for faith is trust.

Jesus himself had to live by trust and if for him it was not always easy then we will certainly also experience great difficulty at times in entrusting ourselves to God's love and care for us. In Saint Mark's gospel, the last words of Jesus as he dies on the cross are *"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"* It must be that Jesus experienced the seeming absence of God in his life at the time when more than ever before he needed the love and support of his Heavenly Father. For many of us the words of Jesus might well be words we find on our own lips or rising in our own hearts in times of great distress.

In the Gospel of Saint Luke a different perspective is offered to us. In Saint Luke's telling of the story the last words of Jesus are *"Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit"*. This is a very moving prayer of trust and of hope. As I read the Gospels it seems to me that these two accounts are not so much contradictory as complementary. Jesus experienced all the

pain and the sense of abandonment which so many people feel in moments of great crisis. And yet, at the deepest level, this did not destroy his trust in God but only led him to call on it more completely. It is possible for us to be in great distress, to experience great suffering and to feel as if there is no way forward, and yet at the same time to entrust ourselves in hope to God believing that no matter what comes we are being held in his loving care.

Where does such faith and trust come from? How can we allow it to grow within us? It is I think more than anything else a gift of God. He can mould and shape our hearts and transform our lack of faith into a strong and sustaining faith – but we must ask him to do this for us and allow him to work within us. God never forces himself upon us, but equally God never walks away from us.

The moulding and shaping of our hearts may itself at times be a difficult and challenging experience. Jesus hints at this in today's Gospel when he speaks about the way in which his Father, the vine-dresser, prunes the vine to allow it to flourish and produce good fruit. All those things within us which prevent us from seeing God as he really is and which stop us from opening our lives to God's love and his presence must be cut away. We have to let go of so much if we wish to be ready to receive the peace that only the Lord can give. Sometimes it is our own human frailty, and the burden of pain and illness, which bring us to the point where we recognize that it is only in God, rather than in anything else, that we can find our rest.

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, which we will offer after this Mass to those who are especially frail, elderly or seriously ill, is a privileged way for us to open ourselves to this deep peace and hope which God wishes to give us. Sometimes that peace and hope will come through physical or emotional healing. Sometimes it will come from a deep spiritual awakening. It may happen spectacularly or very quietly and in a hidden way. We may not even be aware of what God is doing within us as we receive the grace of the sacrament. And yet, we know that God is always true to his promises and his promise is that the Sacrament of Anointing, for those who are seriously ill, will bring the healing and the hope that we most need, even if this is not clear to us.

As Jesus says to us in today's gospel, *"If you live in me I will live in you"*. He lives in us through the sacrament of the Eucharist and, for those who are sick, he lives in us through the Sacrament of Anointing. All we have to do is hold out our hands, open our hearts and say "yes" to the gifts of life he offers us.