

Homily for Easter Sunday 2024

Allow me, if you will, to take you back through the mists of time to an era known as B.C. – “Before Covid”. Five years ago—Holy Week 2019—we knew nothing of the coming pandemic, and yet it was nonetheless a particularly challenging time for many of us here. For starters, we were in the early stages of grieving Fr Joe’s passing. For those of you new to the parish, my predecessor passed away five years ago in tragic circumstances. I was still at North Beach parish at the time, but as many of you know I had served with Fr Joe at Whitfords parish, and in addition to my own grieving, I was feeling for my friends in Whitfords. I was also feeling for all of you here in Armadale, who were enduring the death of your parish priest whilst speculation over the details was being played out on the front page of the newspapers.

Five years ago, we had also just witnessed the painful sight of our most senior Australian churchman—Cardinal George Pell—being sent to prison. His case reverberated with the pain and humiliation of the abuse scandals which had been brought to the fore by the Royal Commission, but his conviction also struck many of us as a bit of a witch hunt – an impression which would be affirmed by the High Court’s quashing of his conviction the following year.

Suffice to say, it was a bruising time to be Catholic here in Perth. And, in the midst of all this, on Tuesday of Holy Week, we woke to the heart-breaking images of the iconic Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris being ravaged by fire. In many ways, it was an appropriate symbol of the pain many of us were experiencing.

The Cathedral of Notre Dame, upon which construction began in 1163, is arguably the second-most important architectural achievement in Catholicism’s 2,000-year history, after St Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Its loss would have rivalled the destruction of the first Temple of Jerusalem or the Library of Alexandria.

And yet, as the flames raged on, and it seemed likely that the entire building would be destroyed, something quite beautiful—and unexpected—was also taking place nearby. As word of the fire spread, countless Parisian Catholics gathered in the streets surrounding the Cathedral, and spontaneously, they joined voice in singing hymns to our Blessed Mother while the cathedral dedicated to her was burning in the night.

To me, this episode captures in a nutshell something essential about our Catholic faith – namely, that it is *alive*; that it is *living*. The beauty of seeing 21st-century Parisians kneel and pray as their greatest tribute to Christ burned is

that, nine centuries earlier, their ancestors created this cathedral for precisely this purpose. The spiritual ancestors of those singing hymns in the streets designed and built this grand building—not as an artistic treasure or architectural marvel, not as a beacon of culture or a landmark of history—but precisely to foster and encourage the kind of living faith that was on display on those Paris streets as their precious cathedral faced destruction.

As more stories from the fire began to emerge, we subsequently learned of how the chaplain of the Paris fire department—Fr Jean-Marc Fournier—had demanded to be let into the burning cathedral with his firemen, risking his life in the process. And before he retrieved any relics or artefacts—even the priceless relic of the Crown of Thorns—he first ran to the tabernacle to retrieve the Blessed Sacrament – to retrieve and protect Jesus truly present in the consecrated Eucharist.

The makers of Notre Dame de Paris lovingly formed its beauty so that Catholics would *see* it; they gave it bells so Catholics would *hear* them; and they intended this church as a constant reminder of our living faith and our dependence upon the living God. If the stories of the faithful singing in the streets—or a priest risking his life to protect the Blessed Sacrament—are any indication, we can say with full hearts that the cathedral’s makers succeeded in that mission.

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Our Catholic faith is alive because *Jesus Christ* is alive. Despite all the reasons why Catholicism could be written off as hopelessly lost—the scandals, the growing secularism, *all* of it—the faith lives on, because—as G.K. Chesterton once put it—we have “a God who knows the way out of the grave.”

Holy Week 2019 was not an easy time to be Catholic here in Perth. The depressing headlines of scandals and abuse, the traumatic saga of Cardinal Pell’s trial, the death of a beloved local priest in controversial circumstances, images of an iconic Catholic landmark in flames, to say nothing of the various personal trials and tribulations that we no doubt all wrestle with.

And yet, the narrative of Holy Week drives home for us an essential principle – namely, that our *hope* is not the kind of hope that is dependent upon favourable circumstances. If our hope were dependent upon favourable circumstances, we might as well pack it in right now, just as Jesus’ followers might as well have packed it in on Good Friday. No, Easter hope was born in the most *unfavourable* of circumstances. Easter hope is based on the fact that ours is a God who has taken a most horrific death, and transformed it into the most wonderful new life; ours is a God who has taken the most extreme darkness,

and transformed it into the most glorious light; ours is a God who has taken the most brutal rejection, and transformed it into the loveliest of invitations.

This is why the image of Parisian Catholics gathering to pray and sing while their most sacred building was ablaze with fire is such a powerful symbol of Holy Week. Remember, even though much of the cathedral would be mercifully spared the worst, this was not at all clear as the faithful sang on the streets. And yet in their song of prayer was evident a powerful truth – that as majestic and important as our great cathedrals are, they are not the Church. Rather, the Church is those Catholics finding grace in the love of the risen Christ, and all of us sharing in that grace even in the face of terrible loss.

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We Christians have the audacity to claim that the Resurrection is not just another story or myth or fairy-tale. We stubbornly insist that it *actually happened*, and that it has changed everything.

This is what makes us Christians. Not being kind to our neighbour, or forgiving people who've hurt us, or helping the poor. Plenty of people do these things who've never heard of Jesus. No, we are Christians because we believe that Jesus is alive. And we believe that Jesus is alive, *because we've met him*.

It is precisely this encounter with the risen Christ that explains so much of what's best in our Christian history. Consider the Apostles – Jesus' closest collaborators, who seemed to consistently miss the point while he was alive, who all ran for cover when he was executed, and who all hid in fear after the fact. They would go from that, to being men without fear, bursting forth ready to take on the might of the Empire, armed with nothing but faith, hope and love, and, besides John—the one Apostle to stay at the foot of the Cross—they all willingly died a martyr's death. The only explanation for such a transformation is a life-changing encounter with the risen Christ.

Or consider the countless saints through the centuries—canonised and otherwise—who have poured out their lives—and often paid with their lives—in ways that would lead a simply well-meaning person to burn-out or become bitter after a few months. It is difficult to explain such lives of generosity and grace and large-heartedness within this-worldly categories. And indeed, the saints themselves are quick to declare a life-changing encounter with Christ as the decisive factor in their lives.

Or consider the several catechumens and candidates among us tonight who, in a few minutes, will commit their lives to Christ in a way that must seem non-

sensical to many in our secular society. Despite all the obstacles they face—a culture increasingly hostile to faith, scandals within the Church, assorted personal tribulations—the Lord has touched their lives and brought them to a place where they now freely and joyfully place themselves in his hands. This, too, is a wonderful witness to the power of the risen Christ to transform lives, even two-thousand years after his earthly life.

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In the face of a bruised and hurting world, our task remains the same as all believers throughout the ages – to allow the living God to live in *us*, so that—*through* us—those we meet may also have the privilege of encountering the crucified and risen Lord. As his disciples, this is our responsibility, and it is our immense privilege.

Yes, our pilgrimage in this passing world will have its share of the Cross, as Christ promised us it would, and yet we have the consolation of knowing that the ultimate victory is already won, and we're celebrating it tonight. And so, as Saint John Paul II so often said, we are an Easter people, and "Alleluia" is our song. Tonight, let us celebrate together the fact that Christ is truly risen, and a new world has dawned. And let us praise our risen Saviour, who comes once more in this Mass to lead us from darkness to eternal light.