

Pastoral Letter

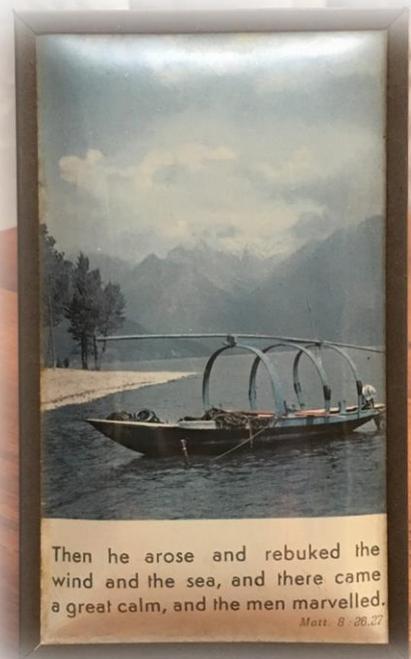
“IN YOUR MINDS, YOU MUST BE THE SAME AS CHRIST JESUS”

On the desk in my office, I have a picture image of a fishing boat on a peaceful lake surrounded by mountains. Printed on the image are these words from Matthew's Gospel, *Then he arose and rebuked the wind and the sea, and there came a great calm and the people marvelled* [8:26,27]. I have had this picture since the days of my seminary training and it has always been on my desk.

In putting together these few words for Lent, it could be said in 2019 that we, as a Catholic community, will meet and experience many storms affecting our personal faith and life in the Church and the wider community in Australia.

The Plenary Council for 2020 was called to give voice to people's concerns, to be listened to, together with new ways of connecting to people in the Church and outside the Church. The very thought of asking people for their views invokes all sorts of reactions and responses, such as *“Will the Church leaders listen? Will anything change?!”* I keep the image above on my desk before me, to centre my life and thoughts always on Jesus Christ, who calms the storms, the doubts and fears, and through whom all things are possible as we journey towards 2020.

Keeping that in mind, one of the great gifts for Catholics is the Season of Lent. Lent is a time of grace, blessing and joy for the turning of hearts and minds towards Jesus Christ. St Paul, writing to the Philippian Christians says, *“In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus”* (2:5). Our hope is to become, *“those who have the Mind of Christ”*. (Eph 2:16) After they called out to Jesus, the Apostles realized who calmed the seas and freed their hearts which had become full of fear and despair on the stormy lake.



Today, many things and distractions turn us away from the mind and heart of Christ even for people of faith. Pope Francis outlines in his letter, *“The Joy of the Gospel”* what some of those storms are which can turn us away from the heart and mind of Christ.

“The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God’s will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ”. (2)

What can be done to enable the People of God to live a dignified and fulfilled life of faith despite the concerns there might be about the Church and the community in which we all live and participate in? One way can be found in our full and active participation in the Season of Lent, which begins every year with the Gospel reading from Matthew Chapter 6: 1-6, 16-18 on Ash Wednesday:-

‘Jesus said to the disciples,

"Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you pray do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray; go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret, will reward you.



.....And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Pope Francis sees Lent as a “sacramental sign of conversion” where we are invited each year to reflect on the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Lent offers an antidote against allowing the negative view of the Church and our community to control our lives and thoughts, and allow the joy of the Gospel to bring about this change of heart and mind through fasting, prayer and almsgiving.

Fasting is not just giving up eating some things during Lent. Fasting reminds us to recognise the many blessings we have received living in Australia, and the opportunity to walk with our brothers and sisters who struggle to ‘make ends meet’ - a saying we are familiar with in Australia! Many parts of our country are in the grip of terrible drought and now massive flooding and bushfires, which has brought great despair to so many people in the rural community. Thousands of people gave up some of their farm produce, which they had been given, to help those farmers in desperate need.



This is a turning away from self-interest to giving without question. Our fasting recognises what Jesus continues to offer us today through his sacrifice and commitment in the Paschal Mystery.

Prayer is about connecting with God and deepening awareness of our neighbour as a part of God’s creation. Prayer encourages us to be present to each other in the hopes, disappointments, joys and sorrows of life. For the person of faith, God is always present through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Prayer, as Pope Francis says in his letter on the Call to Holiness (cf.152) is not about escape or rejection of the world around us, but supporting and bringing together the needs and aspirations of everyone, even if they are not aware it is prayer. St Francis of Assisi said, “Preach the word of God wherever you go, even use words, if necessary.” St Mary of the Cross MacKillop also said, “Never see a need without doing something about it”. Those who have willingly helped the communities suffering from drought and flood ‘mirror’ prayer in action. They expressed through their actions, gratefulness and thanks for the blessings they have received from their abundance. In our prayer, we do the same for all the blessings we have received from Christ being present in our life.

Almsgiving during Lent is not about giving in order to gain God's favour. It is all about the joy of giving without judgment and trusting in the all-pervading presence of the God of creation. All we have comes from God. Through the words of Pope Francis in his Lenten Letter, "We rediscover the joy of God's plan for creation and for each of us, which is to love him, our brothers and sisters, and the entire world, and to find in this love our true happiness." We could not help but be moved by the powerful symbol of unconditional love and generosity seen in people taking hay to starving animals. This surely lifted the hopes and spirits of people devastated who have seen their animals suffer so much. What lasting joy we can experience when what we give makes a difference to another's life. Jesus gave totally of himself out of love to bring joy to our lives.



St Paul says in Romans 8:28 "We know that by turning everything to their good God cooperates with those who love him, and with all those that he has called according to his purpose." Despite the negative narrative we often hear today towards our Church and community, good is being done and experienced by many. These 40 days of Lent will be a blessing for us, a time for renewal, and turning towards each other. Mary the Mother of the Church pondered often in silence what God was asking of her through her Son. May our Lent be a time of pondering in silence what God is asking of us as we rejoice in the "freedom and glory as the children of God" (Rom 8:21b)

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