



**First Sunday of Lent (Year A)
Homily**

**By the Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
Sunday 5 March, 2017

*Have mercy on me God in your kindness.
In your compassion blot out my offence.
Wash me more and more from guilt
And cleanse me from my sin.*

Every Friday morning throughout the year, those who pray the official Morning Prayer of the Church, recite Psalm 50 as part of that prayer. Psalm 50, from which the words with which I started this homily come, is said by tradition to be the prayer of King David, who prayed this prayer in sorrow after he arranged the death of one of his generals so that he, David, could marry the General's wife. When David eventually came to his senses, and realised what he had done, he was overcome with remorse, with shame and with sorrow. The God who had called him from the simple life of a shepherd to become the king of his people, the God who had helped him overcome Goliath, the champion of the Philistine armies, the God who had filled his life with so many good things was, David eventually realised, the God whom David had betrayed and repudiated by his actions. David eventually found the courage to own up to his sin and turn to God in humility. The prayer of sorrow that he prayed is one of the most moving prayers for forgiveness in the whole biblical tradition.

At this time in our Church's history we are very familiar, and tragically familiar, with the sad truth that some of our leaders are as much in need of this prayer as King David was. Being especially chosen by God and richly blessed by God is no guarantee that we will be faithful. It is no guarantee that we will not cause great suffering for God's people. This is a hard lesson for us to learn, and the Church has been learning it, over and over again, from its very beginnings.

One of the confronting features of the season of Lent which we have just begun, focusing as it does on the story of Jesus's final journey to Jerusalem to meet the suffering and death that awaited him there, is the level of animosity, violence and betrayal that this man of peace provoked. Not only did so many of the religious leaders of his time reject him. Most of his disciples, his closest friends, deserted him as well. Judas betrayed him, Peter denied that he even knew him, and all the other apostles, except John, ran away in fear when Jesus was arrested, rather than stand by him in his darkest hour. Failure and betrayal have been a part of the story of the Church from its very beginnings. Human frailty, brokenness and sinfulness are an inevitable but still painfully distressing part of the life of the Church which God has brought into being through his Son Jesus.



We know of course that this is not the whole story. While we must, and do, acknowledge with shame and humility the dreadful failings of the past and sometimes of the present, we must also keep our eyes fixed on the Lord who promised to be with his Church, no matter what, until the end of time. We sometimes speak about "our" Church but it is truer to speak about God's Church. The failings and betrayals are ours - but the holiness and goodness of the Church is God's. *"Do not be afraid"*, he says to us. *"I am with you. I have called you by your name. You are mine"*.

The prayer of King David is a prayer for the whole Church at this time, and for that very reason it is a prayer for each one of us. Perhaps the hardest part of Lent is not so much the things we give up, or the financial support we offer to Project Compassion, or the extra prayers we try to say. Perhaps for each of us, the hardest part is this: to find the courage to admit, honestly and humbly, that I too can and must pray the prayer of King David because I too, like him, am a sinner.

Lent calls us to be honest with ourselves, to stop making excuses for our bad behaviour, to stop pretending that our sins and failings do not really matter or do not cause real damage to others, and to stop imagining that God does not really care about any of this. If we want to walk with Jesus to Jerusalem, comfort him in his suffering, and stand beside him at the foot of his cross - and if we want to join the group of disciples on Easter Sunday morning as they try to contain the explosion of joy that comes with the realisation that Jesus has overcome death and is alive again - then we will need first of all to be honest with ourselves and about ourselves. We are sinners in need of God's mercy and forgiveness. The season of Lent calls us to give our deepest "yes" to God's compassion and healing love, but we will not be able to do so until we acknowledge how much we are in need.

And so I invite you all to search out a copy of Psalm 50, make it your prayer companion during this Lent, and allow God's healing power to restore you to wholeness again.

Have mercy on me God in your kindness.
In your compassion blot out my offence.
Wash me more and more from guilt
And cleanse me from my sin.

My offences, truly I know them,
My sin is always before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned:
What is evil in your sight I have done.