



## Ash Wednesday

### HOMILY

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth  
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*“Turn to the Lord your God again for he is all tenderness and compassion.”*

These words from the first reading of today's liturgy really capture the central meaning and message of Lent. I would like to reflect on them for a few moments because I believe that unless we do so we run the risk of getting caught up in the external practices of Lent and forgetting the reason for those practices.

Those external practices of course are the ones we hear about in today's Gospel reading. Jesus talks about giving alms, about praying and about fasting. However, very importantly he invites us to make sure that these practices are not undertaken so that people will be impressed by how holy we are: rather he tells us to fast, pray and give alms in secret. We are not doing them for show. Instead we are doing them in order to reach out to God in prayer, to reach out to others in charity and to reach out to our own deepest selves through fasting and self-denial.

This I think is the meaning of those very important words from the first reading. Yes, Lent is about prayer, about fasting and about giving alms. In fact, in a sense we will be able to judge just how seriously we take Lent by the willingness we have to engage in these things. But most of all Lent is about turning to God. Our lives are very busy; we all have lots of commitments, lots of worries, perhaps even lots of fears – about ourselves, about our families, about the future. The danger is that we can get so caught up in all these things that we forget about the most important thing – or rather the most important person – God.

And so, Lent is a time when we are invited to “turn to the Lord our God again.” But the first reading tells us something more – it tells us about who this God is. Our God is not a God of anger, a God of vengeance, a God who is determined to make us pay for every little mistake. Our God is a God of tenderness and compassion.

These are very beautiful words – tenderness and compassion. When I think of tenderness I think of a mother or father holding their new-born child in their arms. The beauty of the child, and the child's weakness and utter dependence on his or her parents, bring out of those parents the quality of tenderness. Another word for it might be gentleness, and perhaps care. To say that God is full of tenderness toward us is to say that God is and always will be gentle with us – that God does and always will care for us.



The first reading also says that God is full of compassion. When I think of compassion I think of people who reach out to others in need. I think of people whose hearts are moved by the sufferings of others and who try to do something to help them. And I think too of parents who may be hurt and let down by their children but who know that, more than anger and punishment, their children need from them forgiveness, understanding and love. To say that God is full of compassion towards us is to say that God is full of forgiveness, understanding and love.

This is the God to whom we are called to return during Lent. This is what our prayer, our fasting and our almsgiving are all about. And to return to this God, the God of gentleness, of forgiveness, of understanding, is not a frightening thing. To return to this God does not mean that we lose our freedom, or that life can no longer be enjoyed. To return to this God means that we are once again in touch with the source of real life, of real joy, of real peace.

And so, this is my invitation this morning. It is the invitation of today's liturgy. It is the invitation which God makes to us through his Church. Become during Lent a person of deeper prayer. Become a person who reaches out to those in need with practical help. Become a person who lets go of excesses so that there is room again in your life for God. Return to the Lord your God again. If we accept this invitation, offered to us this morning, then we will arrive at Easter in six weeks time ready to rejoice, not only that Jesus rose from the dead, but that we too have entered into a new and fuller life with him.