



Ash Wednesday

Homily

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**Wednesday 2 March 2022
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

“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 this morning as we begin our Lenten journey together.

In today's gospel reading, we listen to Jesus's invitation to us to enter into a pattern of life which, for many of us, remains more an ideal than the reality. Jesus talks about giving alms, about praying and about fasting. However, very importantly, he encourages us to ensure 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. It is easy for us to forget about God or push God to the margins of our lives. We are very busy people; we all have lots of commitments, lots of worries, perhaps even lots of fears – about ourselves, about our families, about the future. These are very real, no more so, perhaps, than now as we contemplate the horror of what is unfolding in Ukraine, as we think of those so badly affected by the floods in Queensland and New South Wales, and as we face the uncertainties of the rapid spread of the COVID virus here in our community. But in the midst of all this, the season of Lent comes along to remind us that, no matter what dangers or difficulties we face, we are never abandoned by God who remains with us, sometimes hidden but sometimes not, calling us to place our trust and our hope in him.

Lent, then, is a time when we are invited to “turn to the Lord our God again.” It is a time to be honest about our willingness to make space for God in our lives and about our readiness to consciously to live in the knowledge that God is our Father and we are all his children. As the first reading says, 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 images on our television screens of fathers, and some mothers, tenderly and tearfully kissing their young children goodbye as the adults prepare to defend their country, precisely for the sake of their children's future, remind us, too, that tenderness and compassion are not signs of weakness but of courage and strength. We pray that the God of tenderness will give courage and strength to those whose lives and freedoms are under attack.

We pray, too, that the God of compassion will inspire compassion in all of us, shaping and moulding us into people whose hearts are moved by the sufferings of others and who try our best to do whatever we can to help. The need for generous, large-hearted compassion will always be present in our broken and fragile world. The beautiful gift of freedom which God gives us, and without which we are not truly human, is so often and so badly misused, with terrible consequences for innocent people. We see this unfolding in Ukraine now, and we know it is a reality in so many other places around the world. If we do allow the Lenten journey, we begin today to impact on us – if we do, indeed, return to our God of tenderness and compassion, then the broken lives and broken hearts of so many people may begin to heal – because we are allowing ourselves to become instruments of God's healing grace.

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.