



**Friday after Ash Wednesday (Year B)  
2024 Opening Mass**

**Homily**

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Archbishop of Perth**

**Friday 16 February, 2024  
St Charles Seminary, Guildford**

On Ash Wednesday we heard Jesus speak, in the gospel of the day, of what we might call the “Holy Trinity” of Lenten Observance: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. They are the practical ways in which we make real and concrete our determination to walk the journey of Lent with courage, with constancy and with fidelity. They are an invitation to turn our words, our good intentions, into actions, lest we, like some of the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ time, be accused of being blind guides and hypocrites.

In today’s gospel the Church invites us to return to the one of these pillars of our Lenten practice: the theme of fasting. The passage to which we have just listened reminds us, in an echo of the Book of Ecclesiastes, that there is a time for fasting and a time for feasting. For the first disciples of Jesus His presence among them meant that the time for feasting had come – but He warned them that this time of feasting would turn to a time for fasting, when He would be taken away from them and they would mourn His absence.

For every one of us, our own journey through life, which is a journey of faith, will be marked by times when we have a deep sense of the Lord’s presence and equally by times when we feel as though we have lost Him. Both experiences can be gifts from God. His presence fills us with joy, but His absence, or at least our sense of His absence, while it may fill us with sadness and confusion, might become the very thing which makes us want the Lord even more and makes us search for Him more deeply. Something of this is captured in the psalm we pray so often in the Prayer of the Church: “*O God, you are my God, for you I long, for you my soul is searching*”. Each time we pray this psalm we are being invited to ask ourselves whether it expresses a reality, or perhaps a hope, or even something as yet largely, and sadly, not really a part of our daily journey of faith. But even if, or rather when, we fall into this latter category, if we can at least say “I want to long for the Lord” even though at times that longing is very weak” then we are on the right track and the Lord will lead us forward.

Jesus himself, of course, experienced this strange mystery of presence and absence. Remember that from the cross, as Matthew’s gospel tells the story, Jesus cried out “*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*” It was, it seems, his share in the painful experience of the seeming



absence of God. But when Luke's gospel tells of the same suffering of Jesus, we find different words on his lips, words of trusting faith: "*Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit*".

Some people might see a contradiction in these two accounts of the last moments of Jesus's life, and even suggest that they point to the unreliability of the gospels. Really, the opposite is true. We can, and at times almost certainly will, struggle to understand the great mystery of God's presence and action in our lives. God often seems to be absent when we need him most. He seems to be silent when we need him to respond. We pray each day for his will to be done, and we want to be faithful to him, but it seems often so difficult to discern just what his will is. And then, of course, at times his will is very clear and all we want to do is push it away, out of our consciousness – it just seems to be asking too much of us.

None of this was foreign to Jesus' own human experience. In the Garden of Gethsemane His agonising prayer shows that He knew indeed what lay ahead of Him, He was terrified by it, and begged God to spare him from it. But in the end, difficult though it was, He was able to say, "*not as I would have it but as you would have it*". This is a powerful reminder to us that Christian faith and fidelity is not something for those who want to live only on the surface of their lives. Christian faith and fidelity require great courage.

All of this points us to something very important in our Christian faith. It is something that so many Christians including, I suspect, most if not all of us, can very easily forget: that no matter how long we live, and no matter how much theology we master, and no matter how brilliantly and eloquently we might be able to speak about God, God will always be infinitely beyond our capacity to fully know and understand him. As Saint Paul so wisely puts it in his letter to the Corinthians, "*The depths of God can only be known by the Spirit of God*" and so, Paul asks, "*Who can know the mind of the Lord and who can teach him anything?*" We certainly can't, unless, of course, we truly have in us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus – then we can indeed know something of the mind of the Lord – but who among us would dare to presume that this is fully true of us?

For those who are growing in their belief, in their conviction, that God may indeed be calling them to the ordained ministry as priests in his Church, this is a reminder that we of all people must approach the mystery of God with wonder and awe, with great humility, and with deep reverence. We may know the contents of the Catechism off by heart (which by the way would be no bad thing), and we may be able to explain the complexity of the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas (which would also be a good thing) but if we were to think that this meant we had nothing more to learn about God, or that we were somehow experts in the things of God and therefore entitled to impose our own views on others, we might be running the risk of doing great damage to the faith and the well-being of God's people.

There are two great safeguards to protect us from falling into this trap. The first is the virtue of humility, and it is one that we should constantly pray for. Those called to the ordained ministry in the Church are called to leadership of God's people but we must always remember that it is a



leadership modelled completely on the example of Christ, who as the Good Shepherd lays down His life for his sheep, who as the Lord and Master washes the dirty feet of his disciples, who does not break the crushed reed or snuff out the wavering flame of hope and faith in people's lives, and who describes himself as meek and humble of heart.

The second is closely linked to the first for it requires a great deal of humility. It is fidelity to the Church, expressed concretely in obedience to and respect for the local bishop and the Successor of Peter. As people called to the ordained ministry it is the faith of the Church, rather than our own particular slant on that faith, which we are called to offer to God's people. Faithful, mature, responsible obedience to the Church is a powerful protection against the danger of presuming that we know better than those whom the Lord has given us to serve and guide us. The challenge, of course, lies in recognising that we can often be the very worst judges of what the best thing is to do. Our own desires and our own certainties, if we allow them to dominate us, can easily lead us astray.

As a new year begins here at St Charles' seminary, and as we continue the journey of Lent which has really just begun, I invite you to reflect on what it means, for you, to follow the one who is "*meek and humble of heart*" and what it is that you might need to let go of if you are to grow in faithful discipleship of the Lord who calls to you, "*Come, follow me*".