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Message for Lent 2020

The memory of recent bushfires in our Diocese of Broken Bay, and indeed throughout many towns and communities around Australia, has left an unforgettable mark, not only on the landscape, but also on our lives.

Bushlands, forests, animals and human lives have all been marked by ashes. The thick, choking air with its incinerated odour lingered for weeks reminding us that much of what we hold precious had been charred, consumed or changed.

The downpour of rain that has filled our waterways and dampened our neighbourhoods in the weeks following the fires has resulted in the rejuvenation of scorched earth, and the beginning of verdant regrowth of grassy paddocks and forests.

Our Australian environment, while at times harsh and rugged, is a vivid reminder of nature's cycle of destruction and rejuvenation as well as our spiritual cycle of death and resurrection.

It might seem strange to some that as we begin our annual Lenten pilgrimage we are marked with ashes.

They are not a recollection of devastation, destruction, and death. Rather, they serve to remind us, that like the scorched and reborn Australian landscape, our lives too are renewed by faith in Jesus Christ.

Lent is a wonderful, joy-filled time. Pope Francis reminds us that "*Christian joy flows from listening to and accepting, the Good News of the death and resurrection of Jesus*" (cf Pope Francis Message for Lent 2020)

It is a time when the believer's heart and mind are renewed in preparation for the celebration of the paschal mystery.

It is a time when, consumed by the Father's mercy, our lives are purified and God is glorified by our humble, yet sincere effort to live in the image and likeness of our creator!

Lent is not a time of misery and deprivation. It is a time of gladness and abundance in the Spirit. It is not a time of indulgent self-mortification and degradation.



Rather, it is a time of honour and privilege. Honour – because we are sons and daughters of the Father. Privilege - because in Christ we are given a new way of approaching the heart of the Father.

With these simple, but real sentiments we begin our Lenten pilgrimage.

During the Mass of Ash Wednesday, we read from the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew. Jesus speaks to his disciples about three things: **almsgiving** ^(Mt 6:1-6), **prayer** ^(Mt 6:5-15) and **fasting** ^(Mt 6:16-18). These three spiritual exercises have been practiced in the Judeo-Christian tradition for centuries.

Almsgiving, prayer and fasting are not currency to buy God's favour but are our response of gratitude for the love received and experienced. They equip us to undertake works of mercy and they assist us to look beyond ourselves so that we might be true witnesses for others who are in need and who seek to be saved by the Good News of Jesus Christ.

There is no time for self-indulgence in this vision of things. There is, however, ample time to pray as well as contemplate and reflect upon what needs to be converted in one's own life so that all obstacles that impede the authentic and joyful proclamation of the Gospel might be removed.

And so, my sisters and brothers, this Lent, I invite you to claim time to spend with the Lord in prayer. Don't be fearful. Remember the words of the Prophet Isaiah, "*the Lord waits to be gracious to you; he will rise up to show mercy to you*" ^(Isaiah 30:18).

I invite you to embrace the spiritual practice of fasting and abstinence with a joyful heart. Not eating meat on Fridays; reducing food portions; or abstaining from sweets or alcohol are all time-tested ways of entering into the Lenten fast. Rest assured that you will notice the affect in your own life, and hopefully, when you take up the fast you won't become penance for others with whom you live. The spiritual alertness that comes with prayer and fasting will assist us to help others.

During Lent, I invite you to make the time to give special attention to someone who is poor, sick, elderly, alone, overburdened or feeling isolated from our Church community.

All of that will take its toll on each of us, if we are not prepared well spiritually. No one runs a marathon without the right training and sustenance.



Therefore, my sisters and brothers, I encourage you to make good use of the Sacrament of Penance during this holy season. In this marvellous sacrament, we confess our sins and are reconciled to God and to each other.

Having been reconciled, I urge you also to frequent the Eucharist every Sunday. It is in the Mass that we see most clearly the ultimate gift of mercy – Christ sacrificed on the Cross; for the forgiveness of our sins and for the life of the world.

It is through Holy Communion that we are fed on the Body of Christ. He is our living bread, our food for the journey. He is our salvation and His cup is our communion with the blood of Christ.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, my prayer over these coming weeks is that our Catholic community in the Diocese of Broken Bay will seek to live the new life in Christ. This Lent, may we move with confidence and loving reverence deeper into the heart of the Father who is grace, mercy and love. Amen.