



**Fourth Sunday in Lent
Day of Prayer for Survivors of Sexual Abuse**

HOMILY

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
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Some of you may know that this fourth Sunday of Lent is traditionally called "*Laetare Sunday*". The Latin word "*Laetare*" means "rejoice" and is the first word in the Hymn traditionally sung to begin this Mass. The hymn in fact is based on the words of the Prophet Isaiah who calls on God's people to rejoice because, as the prophet expresses it, "*I the Lord will comfort you as a mother comforts her children*".

While our liturgy today invites us to rejoice, we are all very well aware that for many people, there is little in their life which might give them a reason to rejoice. Today, in all our parishes throughout the archdiocese we are praying for those who have suffered sexual abuse in our Church, asking God that all these people will experience the comfort of God in the midst of their sufferings and struggles. I ask you all here in the Cathedral this morning to join with me in holding every victim and survivor of sexual abuse in your hearts and in your prayers and to include also all those family and friends who have suffered and perhaps continue to suffer with them.

I have spoken and written often of the heavy burden which people who have suffered in this way carry, often for the whole of their lives. For many this suffering has been caused by members of our own Church communities, and indeed primarily by those who by virtue of their position in the Church should have been shining examples of the gentle, life-giving presence of Christ among his people, but were the very opposite: this is a source of shame and profound sorrow for us all. The words of today's first reading, addressed originally to the leaders of the Jewish people and meant to recall them to a fidelity which they had abandoned, sound painfully relevant for our situation today. The writer speaks of the heads of the priesthood, and the people too, adding infidelity to infidelity and defiling the Temple, the place of the Lord's presence among them. The writer speaks too of the messenger after messenger whom God sent to his people to call them back to their senses, and of how the leaders of the people ridiculed the messengers of God and laughed at the prophets.

In a sense we might say that the people, and their leaders, closed their eyes, and their ears, and their hearts to the Lord – and how can we not say that the same thing has happened in our Church over the years in which this tragic scandal has unfolded?

Today's gospel seems to carry the same message. It reminds us that God sent his Son into the world so that the world might be saved. "*But,*" the gospel goes on, "*though the light has come into the world people have shown that they prefer darkness to light because their deeds were evil*". That evil has been at work in our Church cannot be denied. Pope Benedict on more than one occasion spoke of "*how*



much filth there is in the Church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to him (Christ)!” Pope Benedict surely had the sins and crimes of abuse in mind as he pronounced this shocking judgment. The Church is a community, a family, of brothers and sisters in the Lord and because of this the whole Church in a sense carries the burden of the sins of the few. As I said in my pastoral letter at the beginning of Lent this year, *we have much to be ashamed of, much to apologise for, much to seek forgiveness for, and much to learn. It would be a further betrayal if we did not, as a community, commit ourselves in this particular Lent to a time of prayer, penance and reparation, and to concrete action.*

Over many years we have slowly come to realise just how much damage has been done, how much suffering has been endured. Today, in acknowledging this, we want to respond, during this Mass, with the gift of humble and heartfelt prayer. We do not pretend that this is all we must do but nor do we dismiss the power of our prayers. We recognise our need to come before God in sorrow for the sins and failures of so many of us, and to plead to the God of infinite mercy and compassion that he will bring hope and healing to all those who have been so badly hurt. And just as, according to Saint James, *faith without good works is dead*, so we know that the sincerity of our prayers will only be confirmed by the ways in which we seek to be instruments of the hope and healing for which we pray on behalf of those who have suffered so much.

Today’s second reading finishes with these uplifting words: *We are God’s work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning God has meant us to live it.* For all those people who, through the actions, or inaction, of some of our bishops, clergy, religious and lay leaders, have lost the sense of themselves as God’s work of art, we pray that through the power of God’s Holy Spirit they may recover something of the joy and the optimism, the innocence and enthusiasm for life, and hope for the future, which were stolen from them. For all those who were responsible for this terrible suffering, we pray for a profound and honest recognition of the damage they have caused and for a change of heart that will lead them to do anything and everything open to them to make reparation for their sins and crimes. And for all those who are working to bring healing and hope to survivors, renewal and purification to the Church, and the creation and maintenance of safe environments for children and young people in our communities, we ask God for the gifts of courage, wisdom and compassion.

May the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah foretold, truly comfort his people, as a mother comforts her children.