



8 February 2018

**Message from  
Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB  
Archbishop of Perth**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

If the Scripture scholars are correct, and the Gospel according to Mark is the earliest of the four Gospels to be written down, then the first recorded words of Jesus in the gospel tradition are these: *the time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; **repent and believe in the gospel*** (Mark 1:15). These same words may well be addressed to you as you come to receive the ashes on your forehead on Ash Wednesday. They express very clearly the invitation of the Season of Lent which we are beginning together. They are words which can guide us all as we journey towards the celebration of Easter.

To take these words of Jesus seriously is to acknowledge that all of us, as individuals and as communities, are in need of repentance. Between what God is calling us to be and what we have so far made of our lives there will always be a huge gap. The words of Psalm 50 are true of each of us individually, and true of the communities of faith of which we are a part: *my offences truly I know them, my sin is always before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned; what is evil in your sight I have done* (Psalm 50:3-4).

Acknowledgment of our sinfulness, and of our inability to free ourselves, unaided, from its pernicious grasp, is the first necessary step towards healing and wholeness. We see this pattern over and over again in the gospels, where Jesus is only able to heal and restore those who are broken once they have come to him, realizing their need and their helplessness, and recognizing him as the only one to whom they can turn. The gift of forgiveness, healing and wholeness is being offered to us today by the Lord, just as it was offered to the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), to the paralyzed man lowered down to Jesus through the roof by his friends (Mark 2:1-12), to the man born blind (Luke 18:35-43), and to so many others including the Scribes and Pharisees who were so opposed to Jesus. Many people said "yes" to the gift of healing and hope offered by Jesus. Some did not. The Scribes and Pharisees, or at least some of them, were so locked into their own sense of self-righteousness that their hearts were closed to Jesus and it seems that he could do little for them. Forgiveness and hope are always gifts, never impositions. The freedom to accept these gifts depends on the recognition both that they are being offered and that we desperately need them.

The first step in repentance therefore is the recognition of those things for which we need to repent. And for this to happen we need the grace of true self-knowledge. This is true for each of us as individuals. It is also true for us as families, as local faith communities, and as the Church. This idea is expressed in another of the psalms:

*When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was dried up as in the summer's heat.*

***Then I acknowledged my sin to you, my guilt I did not hide. I said, "I will confess my offence to the Lord." And you, Lord, have forgiven the guilt of my sin*** (Psalm 32:3-5).



In our Catholic tradition we are very familiar with the idea of an “examination of conscience”. We know that this is an essential part of our preparation to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For many of us it is also an integral part of our daily prayer life; in our evening prayers we look back over the day to recognize where we have failed and ask for God’s forgiveness. In both instances it is possible, of course, to fool ourselves, turning a blind eye to the *“plank in our own eye”* while being very quick to point out *“the splinter in another’s eye”* (cf. Matt 7:3). This too finds expression in one of the psalms in which the writer prays: *Lord, from hidden faults acquit me, for who can discern his own errors?* (cf. Psalm 19:12).

In examining our consciences, individually and as communities of faith, there is always a risk that we do so only in a superficial manner. We list off the things we did which we should not have done. We might also, more challengingly, reflect on the things we did not do which we should have done. This Lent perhaps we can go even further and deeper: perhaps we can consider what lies in our hearts for, as Jesus says, ***“from within, out of the heart of a person, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person”*** (Matt 7:2-23).

How do we read our hearts? How do we read ourselves? Perhaps by reflecting on where most of our time, and energy, and material and personal resources go. Jesus invites us to do this when he says to us: *Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume them and where thieves break in and steal them, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... for where your treasure is there will your heart be also* (Matt 7:19-21). The individual sins we commit, including those involving our failure to act when we could and should have done something, point to our wounded and selfish hearts, for all evil things come from within, and they defile us.

And so Psalm 50, which begins with the words, *Have mercy on me God in your kindness and in your compassion blot out my offence* (Psalm 50:1) also includes the petition, ***A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me*** (Psalm 50: 10).

At this time in our history we are very conscious of our need for a pure heart and a steadfast spirit as the insidious power of sin at work in our own Church communities confronts us. The Final Report of the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* has shone a blinding light into the dark places of the Church, enabling us to realize the terrible burden so many have had to bear, and still bear, because of the devastating failures of some clergy, religious and other Church personnel and the often grossly inadequate response of some of our leaders to this shocking betrayal of trust.

Notwithstanding the good work the Church has done and continues to do for so many people in our society, we now know that the Church in Australia has had a dark and sordid side. 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.

As a small part of this commitment I am asking two things. **Firstly that the first four days of Lent, from Ash Wednesday to the Saturday after Ash Wednesday, be set aside as days of fasting and reparation in sorrow for child sexual abuse and for the healing of victims and survivors.** In doing this we will be joining with the whole Catholic Church throughout Australia. I have organized for resources prepared by the Bishops Commission



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for Liturgy to be made available to every parish to help us make these days meaningful for us all.

I am also asking that every parish and every other Catholic community in the archdiocese **set aside Sunday March 11, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, as a further day of special remembrance and prayer in our archdiocese for all the victims and survivors of sexual abuse in the Church.** The first reading for that Sunday speaks of “*all the heads of the priesthood, and the people too, adding infidelity to infidelity*” and being deaf to the “*messenger after messenger*” which the Lord God sent them to call them back to him (cf. 2 Chronicles 36:14-16). The second reading speaks of Christ through whom “*when we were dead through our sins (God) brought us to life*” (Eph 2:5). The Gospel speaks of those who “*though the light has come into the world ... have shown they prefer darkness to light because their deeds were evil*” (John 3:19). To our shame we can see the story of the Church in Australia in regard to the sexual abuse of children and young people mirrored in these words. On this Fourth Sunday of Lent when the readings will prompt us to reflect on how far some members of our Church have strayed from the path of fidelity we should pray with great earnestness and sincerity for those who have suffered so much because of this infidelity. I sincerely hope that every parish and every other Catholic community which gathers for Mass on this Fourth Sunday of Lent will pray very explicitly and publically for all the victims and survivors of this terrible assault on their human dignity. And of course, unless our prayer is accompanied by practical action to assist those who have suffered and to ensure that no-one in the future suffers in the same way, we will be deserving of the scathing words of Jesus addressed to some of the Scribes and Pharisees: *You are like whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful but within are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness* (Matthew 23:27).

In one of the hymns used in the official Prayer of the Church for Lent the following lines occur:

*What we have darkened heal with light; and what we have destroyed make whole.*

The sexual abuse of children and young people has tragically brought great darkness to many people's lives and for some has destroyed their ability to live life with any joy, hope and companionship. While we must and will do everything we can to repair the damage which has been caused, we must also recognize that ultimately it is God who is the healer. This is why prayer and action must go hand in hand as we seek to respond as the Lord expects us to. We do need God to create new hearts in us. We do need to acknowledge our sins and the weakness and frailty which can blight our lives and the lives of others. We do need to repent and believe, really believe, in the gospel.

May Lent be a time of healing and hope for us all - as individuals, as families, as local faith communities and as the Church.

Yours sincerely in Christ

+ Timothy Costelloe SDB

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