

## Homily Notes for Ash Wednesday 2024

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*These notes are not intended for use as a homily. They are prepared as a set of different ideas that may help to trigger thoughts of your own. They do try to connect the Sunday Gospels to both the Season of Lent, and to the approaching 150th Jubilee of the diocese. JMCK.*

### Ash Wednesday

Celebrating one hundred and fifty years from the birth of our diocese as a separate community provides a fitting opportunity to look back over our past and forward into our future. During the last sixty years since the end of the Second Vatican Council, we have lived through a fairly constant, sometimes bewildering, “era of change”. The Council called for change, for growth. Those of us with long lives and good memories have seen constant changes in attitudes to Scripture, to liturgy, to parish structures, to ministry, to morality and to spirituality. Some of us have embraced them willingly and some of us have resisted. Changes in Church life have accompanied changes to culture generally. Inevitably, we wonder what is going to happen to the Church. Many of us are quietly fearful of the future; some of us hopeful but uncertain.

Whatever about the past, Pope Francis challenges us to look to the present and the future as no longer an “era of change” but rather as a movement into a “change of era”. Something new is “in the air” that we cannot clearly see. Our task, now, is to listen intently to what God seems to be saying to us and asking of us. No one of us singly can be sure of this. God is speaking through the Church as a whole. Our task is to discern God’s will by discerning the common consensus of all the faithful. This asks of each of us that we learn prayerfully to state our own views clearly; and listen equally carefully to the views of others. Then our task, under the trustful guidance of God’s Spirit, is to seek what “we” can all agree to “now”, together, without compromising our own values.

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Today we celebrate Ash Wednesday — an ancient observance with ancient practices. For the Church, Lent is a time of personal rejuvenation and review. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of three common Jewish [at least] practices with a very long history: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. As we move into a new “era” from our forebears, can we keep these practices relevant? Jesus criticised the approach of those of his day whom he referred to as “hypocrites” for trivialising the practices and, consequently, totally missing their purpose.

How do we respond as we stand on the threshold of the approaching era?

Almsgiving today can take shape in “the preferential option for the poor”, whether poor nations, poor social groupings and even poor individuals. In a democratic world, it is a thoroughly political challenge. We cannot approach almsgiving realistically today without acting responsibly in our wider, mutually connected, increasingly politicised world?

In Australia, since just after Vatican II, we Catholics have had Project Compassion. Its founding vision was truly commendable. It still is. Over time, it was administered [and extended] by what was then called “Australian Catholic Relief”. Later it began to collaborate with other similar bodies internationally, and changed its name to “Caritas”. It is still a body that the Church can be proud of; but we can ask the question, however: “Is it enough?”

Prayer, too, in Jesus' day had also become trivialised by many and its purpose forgotten. What Jesus had to say then can still be said today: "When you pray go to your private room and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place...". There is still a significant place for communal prayer in the life of the Church, but private prayer remains irreplaceable. Prayer has seen a wonderful renaissance since Vatican II, and has succeeded in re-shaping numerous religious congregations and seminaries, and has stretched out beyond them to a number of lay groups and individuals. But meditative and contemplative prayer still remains a well-kept secret for many faithful parishioners. The only prayer many people are really familiar with is the Rosary — though Mary herself seems to have been more devoted to letting life touch her with its questions and wonder, to treasure her experiences and to ponder them alone with her God.

Fasting, too, can be a great way to alert ourselves to the deeper truths that "enough is enough", that "small is beautiful". Recently we have been confronted by the fact that the world we live in is a finite, delicate, world on which we are all dependent. Everything in our world is ecologically interconnected. Our natural resources are all limited. Many of them have been greedily exploited, particularly since the Industrial Revolution. We are destroying our atmosphere, exhausting our mineral and forest reserves, polluting our oceans. We are running out of time. We have to learn, and learn quickly, to live responsibly and frugally in our current world.

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Of themselves the traditional lenten observances make little sense in this "Change of era". The same can be said of the way we approach landmark events — like the 150 year anniversary of our diocese. But we do need something like them. We human persons can live our lives unaware, forgetful and unappreciative of what is going on around us. From time to time we need to step back from life and to look at what is happening more alertly. A potent way to do this is through symbolic actions: annually recurring days of remembrance or observance, parades, celebratory meals, etc.. Human beings need their "sacramental actions". Churches appreciate this well.

Our lenten observances of almsgiving, prayer and fasting can be "sacramental actions", symbolic actions, alerting us to and serving to focus our attention on issues in our real world like the crucial prioritisation for the preferential option for the poor, the urgent need to care for the earth, and, for Catholics like ourselves, to learn to listen to our God communicating His Will to us through our regular periods of silent, personal prayer.