

9 March

The season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, the ancient tradition of placing on our heads the ashes from the burnt palms of last year. It is an important and potent symbol. Ash is a symbol of death. We know about this very well in Australia. Summer brings scorching bushfires that destroy everything in their path leaving behind a burnt and blackened landscape. But in time that blackened landscape gives way to new seeds and green growth. The blackness and charred landscape gives way to creation's new cycle of life. We use ashes to remind us that we are on a journey from death to life, dying to self, dying with Jesus, embracing his cross to then bathe ourselves in the joyful and powerful light of Easter resurrection.

From a darkened symbol of death, we Christians solemnly proclaim Jesus as risen, hope and new life for the world. We look at the cross and say 'this is a symbol of death like the ash'. But from this death comes new life, life transformed, creation renewed, death and sin conquered forever. From Ash Wednesday to the first Sunday of Lent, this whole landscape is laid before us, this dramatic story invites not just our observation but our participation. Yes, it is the touching and moving story of Jesus and his life, his passion, his suffering, his death and triumphant resurrection. But it is our story too; your story and mine, the story of the Church, our community and world. Lent and Easter call us to actively participate in this dramatic story of symbols of death becoming symbols of life.

The readings today give us this strong theme of temptation. I spoke to the school children on Wednesday about temptation and making right choices – the temptation to use harmful words rather than kind words, the temptation to exclude our friends rather than including them when we play together, the temptation to fight with brothers and sisters, the temptation to be selfish with the things that God gives us. We know similar temptations in our own lives as adults and the great challenge to overcome these. It's not just the story of Lent; it's the pattern of our whole lives as Christian disciples to find the better angels within us, to overcome that selfish sense of 'self' and to live for others, to live for God.

In today's Gospel, Matthew makes it quite clear that even Jesus was faced with temptations, the temptation to be carried away by the forces of darkness, the forces that entrap us, the forces that are seductive. But

Jesus resists them in order to be faithful to the mission entrusted to him by the Father. Jesus is on a journey of forty days and forty nights in the desert being tempted, having his faith tested, just like the ancient people of Israel wandered for forty years in the desert having their faith tested, on a journey, searching for the God who was actually leading them to the fullness of life. Jesus was tempted. Jesus was tested. Jesus was challenged. But the Gospel begins with him being led by the Spirit and at the end, angels appeared to look after him. It is a very clever device that Matthew uses to remind us that whatever challenges we face, God is always with us and we are never alone. We gather here in prayer precisely as a community of faith to support and pray for each other on the journey of life and faith.

The journey to Easter is our journey with Jesus, the journey from death to life. It is a real journey for those who suffer, those places in the world desperate for peace and democratic stability, it is a real journey for refugees and asylum seekers, it is a real journey for those alone, abandoned and who live with little hope. It is our call and journey to walk with them and carry always deep within us the light and hope of Jesus the risen Lord.