

ASH WEDNESDAY
6 March 2019

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Many years ago, amongst the Wurrundjerri people in Victoria, as it was most likely was with other Aboriginal peoples, it was the sacred task of the women in the tribe during the grey, wet winter months to carry the fire. Fire meant life. In the drizzle and the damp of the winter months, it was, of course, not possible to start fires at every new camp-site. The fire had to be carried. This was achieved by maintaining hot coals in shell cones bartered from the coastal people, like the Bunnarong. Upon setting up camp, the coals could be enflamed into life. It is not difficult to imagine what a vital and important duty it was to carry those shells with the coals inside them, carefully and with a great sense of responsibility.

At times, those coals must have looked like nothing but ash. The challenge to breathe life into the embers must have seemed almost impossible. We can imagine the anxious hope those women must have experienced as they looked for the tiniest spark that could be coaxed into a glow and then into a fire so that their family and kin might have light and warmth and sustenance.

The ashes that mark the beginning of Lent for this year, the charcoal that we are place on our head, are surely the sign of how most of us feel in the wake of the disturbing events of last week when such a senior figure of our Church as Cardinal Pell has been found guilty of sexual assault. This development has turned our own confidence into ash. We are left with the ash of fear, the ash of anger and bitterness, the ash of resentment and regret, the ash of hurt and pain, the ash of shame, the ash of loneliness. We are burnt, perhaps even scorched. We feel the desolation of the bush after a mighty fire has raged through it, and all seems lost, pointless, in the aftermath. We are left dazed, confused, wondering how on earth can anything be rebuilt. And do we even want to?

This is a Lent as perhaps we have never experienced. Yet, this is the season by which its very invitation strips us of our pretences, and our illusions, and our defences, so that we might live with hearts more open in a self-giving to one another. As the German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, the call of Jesus when he encounters us is, "Come and die." We die to something in order to rise to something. We cannot follow Jesus without being prepared to die. Something must die if we are to follow him. And what must die? What must die is a life lived in the "illusion of self-sufficiency," to quote from Pope Benedict several years ago. What must die is a life that is guarded, defended, self-protected. What must die is a life enclosed in on itself, a life that places self-preservation and self-promotion as the means to happiness.

In the way of Jesus, happiness can only be achieved when we forget about ourselves – even for a moment – yes, even when, and especially when, everything would have us turn inside ourselves and enclose ourselves in protection and defence, and when we become alive to the needs of the one who stands before me. Our future lies in the freedom to be able to listen to another, and the freedom to give myself to others. Freedom is never the experience of freedom from something. Christian freedom is always a freedom for something – ultimately the freedom to be able truly to love, and to be able to continue to make those decisions to love, to hope, and to trust even in the face of all that would threaten to negate such choices. In so doing, we turn away from the places of captivity in our life and turn towards the places which liberate our hearts. We turn from what holds us in the grip of fear and stretch out to the horizon of possibility; we turn from the somnolence that covers our days like a pall and we awaken to fresh energy and purposefulness. We say 'no' to that which leads us into the pain of isolation and say 'yes' to that which offers the prospect of communion with others. We turn from death to life.

This is a pathway into vulnerability and through our vulnerability into a radical hospitality to one another. For it is when our vulnerability has become a place of hospitality then we have entered the saving mystery of Jesus' life and mission. This is such a paradox at the centre of the Christian perspective. It is such a difficult prospect, as difficult as taking up a cross upon our shoulders and dying.

Lent, therefore, is not just a time to wallow in our ashes. Lent is the time to stand before the desolation of the fire that has ravaged our hopes and our confidence, and to wonder at how we might rebuild. It is a time to sift through the ash to look for the spark of fire which is still there. We look for the coal that is still warm, that still contains the glow. Where is the spark that still glows amidst the ashes? How do we keep breathing life into this glowing coal, so that from it many fires can yet still be sparked? That spark of fire is our hope, our desire to keep moving forward, what remains of our dream, our trust, our courage, our faith. Lent urges us to retrieve this spark and to kindle it anew. That coal we protect, we keep working with until it springs a flame; we fan it. This is the true significance of repentance.

We are guardians of a dream still burning within the coals we carry. The dream of Jesus of Nazareth - fire for our world, purifying and warming fire. A dream nurtured and maintained by our constant vigilance over it; its coal kept burning by our attentiveness to its promise. But just as coals won't keep alight on their own, we can never presume the vitality of this dream we nurse. Sometimes, painfully and all too late, we discover that the maintenance of the hot coals requires that we must sacrifice all that would make us forget them. This is the invitation of the Spirit given to us in such dramatic fashion this Lent in the face of our shock and distress at recent events and our community's reaction to them.

If we can enter the possibility of Lent for which the symbol of ash is central, then the flame which bursts forth on Easter night in six weeks' time will have profound meaning for us. It will be the sign of the fire rekindled from the ashes in our life: the Fire of the Risen Christ which, even as the shadows encircle it, no darkness can extinguish. We will need that Fire as we move through the subsequent winters of our life as a community of Catholic Faith to warm and sustain us.

May those women of ancient years in our land teach us in our own time of Lent our responsibility and our possibility.