



2018 Lenten Message from Bishop Vincent Long and the Diocese of Parramatta

Dear brothers and sisters,

With the celebration of Ash Wednesday, we begin a season of Lent which is meant to be a journey of renewal and transformation. The 40 days of Lent remind us of the 40 years that God's people wandered in the wilderness before reaching the Promise Land.

It was a challenging but transformative journey. For they were purified and cleansed of all that was unworthy of God. They grew not only in their understanding of who God was but also what it meant to be his people. The 40 years in the wilderness helped them live as a more humble, patient, faithful people.

We too need to be cleansed and purified of all that is unworthy of Christ and his Gospel. We seek to be cleansed of all those things that hold us back, that prevent us from growing to full maturity in Christ. Our spiritual exodus is a journey away from all that is alienating within us into that freedom within which we discover our real selves.

"Let your hearts be broken and not your garments torn". With these words, the prophet calls us to inner purification. In the Old Testament, people would often focus on the customs and the rituals of penance like wearing sackcloth, putting on ashes or fasting. The prophets, however, insist that the outward signs must be accompanied by a real and radical interior renewal.

In view of the deep and systemic malaise of the Church that the Royal Commission has exposed, it seems that we cannot but embrace a real and radical change if we want to go forward. There needs to be an attitudinal change at every level, a conversion of mind and heart in each of us that conforms us to the spirit of the Gospel.

Jesus warns against "new wine into old wineskins". The time has come for us to set aside the old wineskins of triumphalism, elitism, rigidity, status seeking and maintenance.

This Lenten season is an opportunity for the whole Church and especially her leaders to have the courage to die to the old ways of being church that no longer convey effectively the message of the Gospel to the culture in which we live.

It is a time for radical criticism and dismantling of attitudes that are not aligned with God's alternative vision for the people. We need to put the powerlessness and the divine pathos that the humble servant, Jesus, front and centre. As a Church, we cannot move forward until we have fully embraced his radical call to abandon the culture of privilege, self-interest and security in favour of wholesome relational discipleship.

So dear friends,

Let us not be afraid of living the call to divest and empty ourselves of all the things that prevent us from being a more authentic sign of the Kingdom. Let us reclaim the Church as a refuge for the poor, an oasis for the weary and a hospital for the wounded.

May we, through the discipline of prayer, fasting and almsgiving acquire a new heart and a new spirit. Then, like the people of the covenant, we too shall emerge revitalised and become the sacrament of God's compassion and care for the least and the last. May we be nurtured by the love of God and persevere in our journey from death to life.

Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv

Bishop of Parramatta