



**ARCHBISHOP'S LENTEN MESSAGE 2020**

As we come to Ash Wednesday we think of the ocean of ashes in which we have drowned as the fires have engulfed the land. Ours is a land of fire. Fire is part of the ecology of Australia, and it has been for thousands of years. But this was something different, with a touch of the apocalyptic about it. It was not only the number of fires, but our sheer powerlessness to stop them. The efforts of the fire-fighters were heroic, but they too must have felt powerless before the blazes they faced. Flora and fauna were devastated; communities, families and individuals had their lives shattered. It will take a long time to recover and rebuild, and the Church has to accompany all these people in every way possible as they seek to recover and rebuild.

Then came the floods, which seemed to sweep away whatever was left after the fires. We had prayed for rain, and God knows we needed it. But in some places the rains seemed almost too much, and the floods again faced us into our powerlessness before the force of nature.

On top of all this came the threat of the coronavirus, which may be receding but is certainly not behind us. It may have begun in China but the data shows that it has spread far and wide as these pandemics do; and Australia hasn't been spared. Medical science is scrambling to respond, and that's good. But this virus seemed to come out of the blue and left us initially feeling bewildered and powerless, even to understand the virus, let alone cure it.

So as we begin the journey of Lent, events have confronted us with a sense of powerlessness and fragility. Illusions of omnipotence or invulnerability have been shown for what they are: a lie. The truth is that we are often powerless and always fragile. But the greater truth to which Lent looks is that there is a God who comes to meet us precisely where we are most powerless and fragile. That's what the Cross of Jesus means. When he dies on Calvary, Jesus goes to the very heart of all human powerlessness and fragility. He becomes so powerless that he lies finally a corpse on the ground. He becomes so fragile that He's crushed by the brutalities of a violent world. But from the ashes He rises in the moment of Easter, for which

Lent is a preparation – a preparation which takes us down into the dark place of our powerlessness and fragility, the place where we'd rather not go.

We go down to that dark place through Lent, renewing our faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. This was the God who breathed life into the dark tomb of Jesus and led him forth into the light. All the false gods are masters of the lie of omnipotence and invulnerability. They leave us with nothing but the ashes; they are the lords of despair; and Lent is a time to dethrone the false gods.

But the true God is with us – with the fire-fighters battling the blaze, with the communities and families who have lost so much, with the many who are struggling to offer solidarity and support. The true God is with the farmers who have suffered years of drought, and with those who have been stricken by flood – and also with the many who have reached out to people tempted to despair because of drought or flood.

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## THE ARCHBISHOP OF BRISBANE

Lent is the time given to us to open our hearts to the power of Easter. On Ash Wednesday we take the ashes upon ourselves in recognition of the truth that we are often powerless and always fragile. But by the time we get to Easter, we have come to a deeper sense that we are empowered in our powerlessness, that we are made strong in our weakness. Knowing that we can walk from the tomb with Jesus; we can rise from the ashes with him to sing the song of Easter. Fires may rage and floods come, but the voice of hope is always heard. Nothing and no-one can silence the voice of Jesus risen from the dead.

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