



2016 Pastoral Letter for Lent (Year C)

**By the Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

The opening prayer of the Mass for the First Sunday of Lent sets out for us a challenge as we commence our Lenten journey this year:

Grant, Almighty God, through the yearly observances of Holy Lent, that we may grow in our understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects in our lives.

If we were to make this prayer our own, as we are, of course, invited to do at every Mass we celebrate, we would be asking the Lord first of all for the gift of understanding and then for the courage and the wisdom to translate what we are coming to understand into the reality of our daily lives.

What the prayer asks of God is that He helps us to understand the depths of the mystery of Christ and the riches hidden in this mystery. In our tradition, this mystery refers more than anything else to the meaning of the death and Resurrection of Jesus. That Jesus had to die, and just why He had to die, has been a question which has troubled Christians from the very beginning.

Certainly, when I was a young boy in primary school, we learnt that Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins. It was true when I learnt it all those years ago and it is still true today. But just why, or how the death of Jesus might save us from our sins, was never really explained very well. I do remember being taught that the sins of humanity were so serious, because they offended God so much, that no ordinary human being could ever hope to make up for them. For this reason, God had to send His Son, who became a human being like us and then died in our place, accepting the punishment which was really due to us. And, because He was God as well as a man, His death, unlike anything we could do, was enough to satisfy God's anger and make up for every human sin that would ever be committed.

I have always had some problems with this explanation. It is not so much that it is not true but rather that it expresses only part of the truth. On the one hand, it certainly shows us how serious sin is and warns us never to take our sinfulness for granted, as if our sins did not really matter. After all, they caused the death of Jesus. But, on the other hand, the whole explanation depends on the idea that God is angry about our sins and will not be satisfied until someone has paid the price. This image of an angry God demanding punishment for people's sins does not fit in very well, especially in this jubilee Year of Mercy, with the image which Jesus Himself gives us of His Father. Think, for example, of the story of the prodigal son. Even though



the son treated his father shamefully and, so we would say, deserved to be punished, in the story, the father is just so glad to have his son back that not only does he not punish him – he throws a party to celebrate the son’s return. Or think of the woman caught in adultery: according to the Law of Moses, she certainly deserved to be punished, but what does Jesus do? He simply says to her, *“I do not condemn you – go now and do not sin anymore”*.

The Gospels, then, do not encourage us to think of God primarily as an angry and punishing God. Rather, we are invited by Jesus Himself to understand that God looks at us with mercy and compassion, not anger. How could He not look at His Son in the same way? Why would He punish His Son in place of us?

If it is hard to accept that Jesus died to satisfy God’s anger, what other reason could there be? There used to be an alternative opening prayer for the Mass of the First Sunday of Lent which is no longer in use. This prayer talked about the fact that, when God created us, He breathed into us the breath of life, but we turned away from His face and fell into sin. It is Jesus who brings us back to the Father by helping us to live as God intended us to live. All of us, because of our sin, live lives that are much less than God would like them to be – we are much less than God would like us to be. But there is one person who was everything that God wanted Him to be – and that person is Jesus. His life was a life of total fidelity to God and total self-giving to us. And because Jesus refused to turn away from His Father, because He refused to take the easy way out, because He remained faithful even in the face of violent opposition, He ended up losing His life, cruelly murdered by those whose own lives were so ruled by fear and selfishness, so ruled by sin, that they had to destroy Him. Jesus did not die because His Father was angrily demanding satisfaction for our sins: Jesus died because He lived the life of faith and fidelity that we are all called to live, but find it so hard to do. And we human beings, in our fear and anger, sought to destroy Him.

This is the meaning of His death – that goodness was attacked and destroyed by evil. But, for Jesus, death was not the end. Through His death, and His willingness to be faithful to His Father’s will and faithful to His love for us, Jesus was brought to the Resurrection. And our opening prayer of this First Sunday of Lent asks that we understand all the riches hidden in the mystery of Christ: not just His death but also His Resurrection. Fidelity, love, selflessness, generosity – these qualities which, in the story of the death of Jesus, initially look as if they are powerless in the face of evil, turn out to be much more powerful than evil. And why? They are the qualities of God Himself and can never be ultimately destroyed.

Through His death and Resurrection, Jesus does not just win a victory over evil for Himself. He wins that same victory for every person who is willing to be drawn into the beauty and the mystery of Christ’s love for us. And this, of course, is exactly what we are doing as we celebrate the Eucharist. We are being invited to allow ourselves to be drawn into communion with Him so that, as St Paul would say, we no longer live but, rather, it is Christ who lives in us. And, if Christ lives in us – and this is the promise of the Eucharist – then



our lives will gradually, day by day, do exactly what our opening prayer asks: reflect the mystery of the riches to be found in Christ and in His death and Resurrection.

This possibility is the Lord's promise and the Lord's gift to us. But we must remember that it is precisely that: a gift. The Lord will never force Himself upon us. That is the way of violence, not the way of love – and the way of the Lord is a way of friendship and love. Lent is a privileged time when this gift and this promise are being held out to us once again. *“Do you want to live life to the full?”* Jesus asks us. *“Do you want your life to be marked by generosity, selflessness, fidelity and love? Then open your heart to me; let me draw you more deeply into communion with me; let me live in you and work in you and transform you into the person you want to be, the person you were created to be.”*

This is the Lord's invitation to us as we set out on our Lenten journey. Through our prayer, our penance and our generosity to those in need, may our hearts be opened and made ready to say yes to this invitation.