

We know, perhaps all too well, what a land of contrasts this country is. In Australia at any one time there can be places suffering under the ravages of drought, battling down for cyclones, mopping up from floods or losing everything in the terror of bush fire. For those caught in the unreal environment of our cities, the threat of bushfire rarely touches us. Not so for those on the fringes of our cities, and certainly not for those in the bush.

As we know, parts of our environment do not fare at all well when fire passes through. Forests where the canopy trees take 100 years to mature, or rainforests, can well do without fire and will in fact never recover. But we also know that some parts of the Australian bush do need the regular cycle of fire to regenerate. It is a small miracle of our environment that blackened stumps and charcoal and ash give way in time to the green buds of new life.

The faith of the church catholic never shies from taking the elements of earth – water, bread, wine, oil, ash – to communicate eternal truths. In this part of our annual cycle we are given the opportunity - we are invited - to let the Spirit of God do its cleansing, life giving, life changing work within us. As a fire can purge and purify the land, so Lent can purge and purify us.

On this day as we commence the holy season of Lent, we take ash and mark it upon our foreheads. We would do well to ponder, to meditate deeply, upon the deep truths this simple gesture seeks to communicate. Fire destroys. It takes away what we hold precious. Fire can reduce to ash so much of what we value and treasure. But sometimes, as for the bush, that is what is needed for ourselves: to let the consuming, transforming fire of God's Spirit burn within us. There is so much in our lives, so much clutter, so many distractions, so much that diminishes us that sometimes we need a fire to rage through us: to burn, cleanse, refine, purge... Lent offers us this opportunity.

In this holy season we are reminded of our complacency. And so the mark of ash on our foreheads is really a slap in the face to our indifference, to our contentment to simply wander and drift through life. This ash a reminder – a warning – not to take for granted our life with God. This holy season is an invitation to consider how little control we actually do have of our lives, how much we are creatures of habit and ill-discipline.

So, Lent provides us with the tools to help remedy this. The Gospel the church places before us today unambiguously presents us with those tools which can help us get back on track. Christ tells us, 'When you pray, when you fast, when you give alms'. Not 'if'. But 'when'. Prayer, which helps reorder and realign us with God; fasting which helps reorder and realign us with our own bodies; almsgiving, which helps reorder and realign us with the world around us.

To give ourselves fully to these practices is costly, and can be difficult, like fire raging through us. But rightly so. For this holy season is gifted to us that we might incorporate ever more closely into our own hearts and lives the costly sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. And just as his sacrifice brought life to us all, so may this holy season. From this ash, new life can spring. May God grant us all a good and holy Lent. Amen.