Lent…

The season of mercy

I love Lent. Now that may seem odd considering it’s a season of fasting and penance, self-searching and self-denial. We enter this season with a cross of ash on our forehead, a sign of repentance and sorrow. We are asked to give up, abstain. For some Lent is something of an endurance test – can I get through the forty days without giving in and doing what I said I wouldn’t do, or succumbing to the temptation to indulge in that chocolate? But Lent invites us into so much more than that. Lent is God’s tender embrace. It is the embrace of the God who is Love, and whose ‘longing’ to draw all of creation into that Love, will not let us alone. “Can a mother forget her baby or a woman the child of her womb”, says the Prophet Isaiah, “yet even if these forget I will never forget you” (Isaiah 49:15). And this speaks to us of Lent. Just for a moment close your eyes and feel yourself held close in the warm and comforting, sure and loving embrace of a mother’s touch. What an utterly beautiful and compelling image of being scooped up into God’s tenderness and holding-close. Lent is when we remember this. It is the season of mercy: God’s mercy to us and our mercy to the world.

The season of Lent was established in the Northern Hemisphere, as the Church developed there, and thus falls in spring. There is wonderful symbolism in this – the new life we will celebrate at Easter, and our journey into that new life as we allow God to cleanse and purify us through our Lenten practice. But for us in the south, as of necessity we keep our liturgical seasons in sync with the northern Church, Lent for us falls in autumn. There is something beautiful and profound about this autumn Lenten experience that really touches me. I can’t help thinking of Keats’ marvellous poem, Ode to Autumn:

“Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness
Close bosom friend of the maturing sun …”

As we move deeper into the season of Lent the days become shorter and we begin to feel that unmistakeable autumn feel in the air. Little by little the first leaves begin to turn yellow and red … and fall … and soon we find ourselves in a blaze of glorious autumn colour. The sunsets and sunrises seem sharper and more vivid. But it’s that mellowness and fruitfulness that Keats writes of that I find speak to me so profoundly of Lent. We too are invited into mellowness. We are invited to surrender, to let God be God in our lives. And to do that we have to create a space, a space in our hearts and in our thinking and doing and wanting, a space for God to enter, and mould, and transform. God’s fruitfulness - this is what beckons. God’s fruitfulness in us and, through us, in the world.
A very disturbing thing is playing out in our world at the moment and it touches all of us - the two young men, Myuran Sukumaran and Andrew Chan, on death row in a Bali prison, awaiting execution. As we know, the pleas to spare them are falling on deaf ears - the petitions signed by thousands of people, the Mercy campaigns, government intervention and so many tears have, to this point, not softened the resolve to carry out that most brutal of all sentences. We have all been moved and distressed by those heart wrenching images of their families, their mothers and grandmother, begging for mercy for their children. Yes, they have done wrong. They have committed a serious crime, but what are we to make of this, this final and irrevocable punishment for wrong? And what does Ash Wednesday and Lent have to say to us about this?

This week, on Ash Wednesday, we held liturgies throughout the day in our school chapel to mark this special day, a Year group attending in each period, and with some of the Year groups we listened to the Gospel story of the woman caught in adultery. It’s a story told by John (8: 1-11) about a woman who had done something wrong. She had broken the religious law of her day and was about to be punished for it, just as the law required. But Jesus had something to say about that - and he had something special to give to that woman too:

“Early in the morning Jesus went to the Temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery. They made her stand before all of them and they said to him: ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them: ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her’. And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. He stood up and said to her: ‘Woman, where are they? Has no-one condemned you?’ ‘No – one sir’, she said. ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on, do not sin again’.”

This story took place 2000 years ago but it is exactly what we see happening before our very eyes today with Myuran and Andrew. Imagine that scene: a woman dragged before her accusers, ready to stone her. Women were without power in public life in those days and there she was, caught in adultery, in the very act we are told, and about to be stoned to death. Yes, she too had done something wrong. She had broken the religious law of that time and the Pharisees - the ‘religious police’ of the day, who loved to catch people breaking the law – were going to give her the punishment laid down in that law – death. And into this horrific scene came Jesus. We don’t know what he wrote in the sand, the text doesn’t say. But we can be fairly certain that it was something that made those accusers vividly aware of their own imperfections, that they in fact had no moral high ground on which to stand and from which to condemn her to death. They dropped their stones
and walked away. And it is then that we get to the heart of this story. Two important points are made by Jesus: the first, ‘I do not condemn you’, and the second, ‘But go and do not sin anymore’.

Jesus did not condemn the woman. On the contrary he cared for her, he welcomed her and he brought a flood of life-giving mercy into her life, into that scene of death. Can you imagine how she felt as this man, Jesus, not only saved her life, but treated her with love and care, something perhaps that she had not known before. I’m sure she must have shed tears at being treated gently like that. The second thing to note is that he did acknowledge that what she had done was wrong. He didn’t say it was okay, or play it down, or brush it aside. ‘Go and stop doing what is wrong’, he said. He was very clear about that. But he did invite her into that new way of being, in the context of being loved. Her action was wrong but she herself was loved. And that’s the great message of this story!

Why didn’t Jesus condemn her? After all she was a sinner! He saw that, but most of all he saw her innate dignity and sacredness, that sacredness which is our most original inheritance as ‘children of God’ and which no action, no matter how bad, can erase. And he set her on the right track again. *I don’t condemn you but go and do better!* He sent her away to make better choices, to repair her life. He asked her to turn away from something and turn towards something else. And what this story imprints on our hearts and minds and indeed on our very soul, is that each one of us is worth more than our worst action. We need to hold that close and keep it before us as we stumble and meander along our way. ‘I will never forget you my people’, is God’s word to us.

If we do a sweep of the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures we find there the story of a people ‘called’ and embraced by God. This is the Divine initiative, we might say, reaching out, drawing in and holding close. It is a love story. But this story does not move forward in a straight line. Sometimes it seems to be two steps forward and one step back! These people wander, fall away, turn to other more immediate forms of gratification, resist and rebel. At times they do rise to lofty heights, only to stumble and fall away again. But always there, as the story unfolds through many authors and over a long period of time, is that persistent and faithful call of Love: ‘Come back to me with all your heart’ (Joel 2:12). Even as the prophets chastise, the reminder of this Love is never far away. They repeatedly and relentlessly proclaim God’s faithfulness and exhort their people to turn away from what seems attractive and inviting, but is only fleetingly so, and will ultimately sell them short. The prophet Hosea went so far as to use the image of marital infidelity to describe this meandering and wandering. He accused Israel of being a whore, breaking that bond of love and trust, but then he utters, on God’s behalf, these most beautiful words: “Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her ... And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy” (Hosea 2:14, 19).

This is the heart of Lent. It is not a gloomy, punitive experience of endurance! It is an invitation of Love and to love. It is an invitation to open our lives, our hearts, our minds to God’s mercy. Like a feverish child, tossing and turning, we are invited to surrender to that soothing embrace and let it
wash over us and seep deeply into our very being. The ashen cross on our forehead proclaims this most eloquently.

To surrender to this Love, we are asked to become mellow enough and trusting enough to let go, to fast. The season of autumn too speaks to us of trust, and faith. Leaves gently fall from the trees, as they are ready to do so. In time the branches will be bare, open to the wind, rain, sun, cold. When the time is right, and ripe. And Lent asks us to ripen, and allow ourselves to fast. When we fast we create a space, in our hearts and minds, in our days. To fast is to let those clamorous voices within and without quieten down. Let all those needs, all those ‘must-haves’ and ‘wants’, fall away like the leaves of the autumn trees. Fasting is often associated with struggle and endurance and can have a penitential feel about it, but if we enter this in the right way, we will see that there is a wonderful invitation there. As we create this space, whether it is going without something we enjoy eating or doing or think we need, we let go and we give our attention to another hunger — the hunger for goodness, love, peace, truth — the hunger for God. And so we gently fall into something deeper, more lasting, more nourishing.

Matthew, in his Gospel (4:1-11), tells the story of Jesus in the desert. When Jesus went into the desert for forty days and fasted, he was stripped of all that might otherwise distract and fill him, and there, in that ‘nakedness’, he faced the temptations we all face. He confronted all that pulls and tugs at the human heart in so many ways, and as each temptation surfaced he responded in the same way — he took refuge, we might say, in that embrace of Love: “One does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” … “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” … “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him”. This is the response of a man who was willing and able to let go of everything and fall into the ‘arms of God’. And this is where Lent calls us.

The spiritual writer and Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, said that Lent is a time to receive the gift of God’s mercy and that we receive this gift insofar as we open our hearts to it and we cast out what cannot remain in the same room with mercy. This is what it really means to fast. Most of the time it is all too easy to slip into wanting everything, and we certainly do sometimes try to have everything crammed into that one ‘room’. It is impossible to sustain that and, at the same time, fall more and more deeply into that embrace of Love. There is a wonderful yet simple story told about Therese of Lisieux. When she was a little girl of seven, her older sister, Leonie, decided it was time to give away her toys. So she packed them all up into a basket and went into the room where Therese and her sister, Celine, were playing. She told them they could choose one toy each and the rest were to be given to an orphanage. Celine chose a brightly coloured ball, but Therese, paralyzed, could not choose, and finally she exclaimed, “I choose them all! I want them all!” How easy it is for us to go there too! But it is a very crowded room. What enables us to move beyond this impasse of indecision, is that we know, at some level, that there is something infinitely more inviting, nurturing, and indeed, eternal … and that is God’s tender embrace. But we have to mellow somewhat to
choose that! While we are busy about many things, that tender Love waits for us to pause, to let go, and to let ourselves be embraced.

But back to our story. As Jesus became aware of the horrific scene about to unfold before him he took action. He entered it and transformed it. His own inner knowing of God’s mercy was to be poured into the world as well.

And this is what we are called to do too. There is much darkness in our world: every day we hear of the terrible things that people do to each other. We’re facing terrorism, which is very frightening, innocent people taken and killed; we see poverty, children dying for lack of food and the medicine so quickly and easily available to us. We see human trafficking, that terrible crime of commodifying human life; we see war ... and it goes on and on. How do we respond to this darkness? Do we just shrug it off and say it’s too big for me to do anything about? Or do we get frightened and fearful and close up to the world and to others? There’s something better we can do. “Don’t curse the darkness, light a candle”, is a saying I love. That candle is the light of love, care, forgiveness, justice and peace, and this is what we are to bring into the confusion and fear we find. Our voices, our actions, no matter how small they seem, our prayers, the support we give, are all a powerful force for good in the world. We are called to repair the world. Remove whatever cannot remain in the same room with mercy.

How can anyone find that God loves them if we don’t let them know? Lent reminds us of this. God’s mercy to us and our mercy to the world.
During the days ahead let’s continue to pour that mercy and love onto Andrew and Myuran.

I took them up in my arms,
But they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness,
With bands of love,
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.
Hosea 11:3-4

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