



A Lenten Message

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For forty days Christians go on a retreat they call 'Lent'. In doing so, they imitate Our Lord who spent 40 days and nights in the desert before beginning His public ministry (*Mt 4: 1-11*). We join Christ in the Lenten tasks of fasting, prayer and almsgiving, and so face up to our demons as He did.

But why did Jesus go on retreat for 40 days? Well, we know that Moses spent 40 days with God on Mount Sinai, so that seems to be a good length of time for a retreat with God.

We know that Jonah gave Nineveh 40 days in which to repent and so that seems a good length of time for us to spend repenting.

And we know that God made the rain last 40 days and nights in Noah's time – with results not unlike our recent floods in Australia – and so that's a good length of time to contemplate Baptism.

In the early Church, the catechumens – those preparing for Baptism at Easter – observed strict fasting and prayer throughout Lent while receiving their last catechesis.

In due course this practice was extended to all Christians, not just those preparing for Baptism and those accompanying them. It gives us all a chance to prepare better for Easter.

Lent is, then, a time to renounce some simple pleasures like chocolate or alcohol for 40 days, to abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, to adopt other penances especially on Fridays, to give to the poor especially through Project Compassion, and to offer extra prayers and devotions (such as the Stations of the Cross).

Especially important is celebrating Confession. To make this easier this year we have arranged Second Rite of Reconciliation services in all our deaneries. These will be at 7.30pm on:

Thursday 7 April at St Patrick's Church, Blacktown;
Friday 8 April at Holy Trinity Church, Granville;
Monday 11 April at St Thomas Aquinas Church, Springwood;
Tuesday 12 April at Padre Pio Church, Glenmore Park;
Wednesday 13 April at Our Lady of the Rosary Church, Kellyville;
Thursday 14 April at St Patrick's Church, Guildford; and
Friday 15 April at St Michael's Church, Baulkham Hills.

We will prepare and make thanksgiving together. We will celebrate the sacrament individually. There will be plenty of priests on hand so it will not take too long. And I'll be there to preach some short and hopefully helpful words of encouragement!

To come to Confession is important whenever we are conscious of having committed a grave sin. But it is a good practice, at least every Lent, even to confess our lesser sins.

Confession is like a concentrated dose of Lent.

Instead of 40 days it takes only a few minutes. But in those few minutes we join the Ninevites in repenting, we join Moses in spending time with God, we join Noah in contemplating the water (of Baptism).

In Confession we join the catechumens, praying in preparation for their Easter initiation, and we share in their excited expectation of release from guilt. Indeed the Sacrament of Confession has been described as 'Second Baptism' because it returns us to the state of grace of the newly baptised.

And like Christ after His Baptism and Lenten retreat, it makes us ready for a new 'public life', returning to the world renewed.

Confession is like a concentrated dose of Lent in another way too. Confession, like Lent, is about fasting, prayer and almsgiving. The prayer part is obvious: we pray to God for forgiveness; the priest prays the absolution over us; we give thanks to God in prayer for the new start we are given.

But there's a kind of fasting in Confession too. We have to give up something – our attachment to sin, our bad habits, our exaggerated pride in ourselves. It is humbling. Sometimes it is hard. It's a harder kind of self-denial than giving up chocolate.

Almsgiving, too, comes into Confession. The priest gives us a penance, often a prayer or some work of charity to do. Principally, this is to bring some repair to ourselves but it is also a kind of reparation to God and neighbour for the wrongs we have done.

So we are giving something to others in giving ourselves in Reconciliation. We are restoring friendship with them. We are renewing our baptismal promises to be there for them.

Confession is the highlight of Lent because there we hear that what Christ endured was all *for us*. The sinless One took away the sins of the world. He gave us a clean slate, a fresh start. He wants us to celebrate that very personally with Him.

God bless you in the season of Lent. Especially if you haven't been to the Sacrament of Reconciliation for some time, I very much hope to see you at one of our penitential services.