

PROJECT COMPASSION

FOR ALL FUTURE GENERATIONS



WEEKLY REFLECTIONS

(Based on the Sunday Scripture readings through Lent)

ASH WEDNESDAY

Written by Michael McGirr

Joel 2:12–18 | Ps 50:3–6, 12–14, 17, R. v.3 | 2 Corinthians 5:20–6:2 | Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18

It is curious that this year Ash Wednesday happens to fall on the same day as St Valentine's Day. This doesn't happen very often. St Valentine's Day is a great occasion for florists and restaurants. Some people get carried away and arrange to propose marriage in hot air balloons and beside beautiful waterfalls. This is all great fun, and it is delightful to see people dizzy with love.

We all know that real love is about more than the good times. It is a commitment to grow together and encounter each other more and more deeply, even when the going is tough. There are legends about St Valentine but it's not clear who he may have been. The chances are, however, that he was a martyr in the early period of the Christian story. He knew that love meant sacrifice. Love lays down its own life to give life to others.

Ash Wednesday is the perfect day to think about love. We don't see flowers in church today and we are asked to eat modestly. Today, we begin our journey towards our observance and celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter. The cross of Jesus is the ultimate symbol of how profoundly God loves the world.

Lent is a time when we are also asked to consider how authentically we make God's love visible to others. The reading today from St Paul reminds us that 'we are ambassadors for Christ.' This means taking risks and reaching beyond our comfort zones to share a message with a world that is often indifferent and doesn't want to hear it.

Each year, through Project Compassion, Caritas Australia offers us a significant opportunity to become ambassadors for Christ. The prophet Joel says, 'Why should it be said among nations, "where is their God?"' In other words, we must try to live the message of Jesus, which is one of justice, compassion, inclusion and extravagant love.

Today's Psalm is a reminder that God speaks through us:

*Give me again the joy of your help,
With a spirit of fervour sustain me,
O Lord, open my lips,
And my mouth shall declare your praise.*



Leaia sits with her daughter in their home in Samoa.

Credit: Laura Womersley/Caritas Australia

PRAYER



We pray for all who are trying to rise from the ashes in their lives. May our support for Project Compassion remind us that now is the time to turn to the Lord with all our hearts and embrace the needs of God's whole family.

Amen

FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Written by Michael McGirr

Genesis 9:8–15 | 1 Peter 3:18–22 | Mark 1:12–15

Mark's Gospel is bold and challenging. It doesn't beat around the bush. Throughout this year, there will be many Sundays when we really need to tune in because Mark's Gospel doesn't wait for the reader to be ready. It is right in your face, to use a modern expression. Sometimes Mark reminds us of the wise old person who doesn't use many words, but every one of those words counts. There can't be many books of so few pages that have had such a mighty impact on the world.

Today, a few lines tell us that Jesus went into the desert for 40 days and 'was tempted by Satan.' He was 'with the wild beasts', meaning he was vulnerable as he was immersed in the natural world. This was surely an experience of struggle and growth. Then suddenly Jesus discovers that John the Baptist has been arrested. In a few lines, Mark creates the impression of a challenging time.

How did Jesus respond? He seems to have been enlivened, to have decided to create change. He is full of energy and purpose. 'The time has come,' he says. In his vulnerability, he has discovered that 'the kingdom of God is close at hand.'

This year, through Project Compassion, Caritas Australia will ask us to consider several stories of vulnerability and hope in action. Over the coming weeks, we will meet a number of extraordinary women: Ronita from the Philippines, Leaia from Samoa and Memory from Malawi. They remind us that in many situations around the world, women are the heart of the community and the drivers of change. In each case, a partnership involving Caritas Australia and local agencies has led to new opportunities not just for an individual but for families and communities. The kingdom of God is, indeed, closer than we think. Together with Ronita, Leaia and Memory, our decisions help to bring it to reality around the globe.

Perhaps we might spend time with the words of today's Psalm: 'God guides me in the right path; God teaches the Lord's way to the poor.'



Memory collects water at her family village in Mwanza district, southern Malawi. Photo: Tim Lam/Caritas Australia

PRAYER



We pray for all those around the world who are vulnerable to the impact of poverty, violence, and climate change. May our generosity towards Project Compassion be a measure of our commitment to global change.

Amen

SECOND WEEK OF LENT

Written by Michael McGirr

Genesis 22:1–2, 9–13, 15–18 | Romans 8:31–34 | Mark 9:2–10

When Jesus took his closest friends to the top of a high mountain, they experienced something quite extraordinary. The transfiguration gave them a glimpse of what it meant for Jesus to be the son of God. It is hardly surprising that Peter said, 'it is wonderful for us to be here.' The Gospel also tells us that Jesus' friends were frightened, and this is also easy to understand. They were overwhelmed. Nevertheless, it's not long before Jesus reminds them that he is destined to die. His friends must come down from the mountain and walk with Jesus through all the ordinary and arduous days and weeks that lie ahead.

We can all say 'it is wonderful for us to be here' no matter where that happens to be. Life is full of wonder. That doesn't mean it is always easy. We live in the arms of a very deep mystery. God's love enfolds us.

Throughout Lent, we are called to support Project Compassion, an initiative of Caritas Australia. This year, Project Compassion celebrates 60 years of partnership with some of the most marginal communities in the world. With your help, we have walked alongside literally millions of people in dozens of countries.

This week we encounter the story of Ronita who lives in Quezon City, part of metro Manila in the Philippines. Becoming a mother at a young age meant that her schooling was cut short. Her husband, Lean, leaves for work at 3am and returns at 9pm, earning less than \$US10 per day in a demanding job in waste disposal. On such a small income, Ronita and Lean, along with two young children, are able to rent a room of about 10 square metres.

With your help through Project Compassion, Caritas Australia has been able to support the Faithful Companions of Jesus (FCJ) to run the Alternative Learning System program. This program has meant that Ronita has been able to continue her education. The FCJ sisters provide a safe space for many young people such as Ronita to finish school and find better jobs. Ronita has had the opportunity to change her life.

Caritas Australia believes that the world can be transfigured to become more like the kingdom of God of which Jesus spoke. We can encounter people whom others choose to ignore. When we do so, we discover that here too are children of God. We are asked to listen to them.



Ronita holds her sons in their small home in Quezon City, Philippines. Photo: Richard Wainwright/Caritas Australia

PRAYER



We pray for gratitude for the wonder of faith in God and the beauty of life. May our vision be broad and deep as we embrace people in great need through our support of Project Compassion, organised by Caritas Australia.
Amen

THIRD WEEK OF LENT

Written by Michael McGirr

Exodus 20:1–17 | 1 Corinthians 1:22–25 | John 2:13–25

If the world is one great classroom, then God is a fantastic teacher. We have all had experience of this: the firm and gentle way that God opens our minds and helps us to understand.

Today's readings show three different ways that God tries to get through to us. In the first reading, God sets some clear expectations for behaviour. They are all based around respect, both for the teacher and for those with whom we share the class! At the same time, God reminds us 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the house of slavery.' In other words, these are not random rules. They are designed to protect our deepest freedom. Disregarding them sends us back into captivity.

In the Gospel, Jesus is annoyed by people who think they know everything but who have not properly understood the basic lesson about justice and reverence. 'Stop turning my father's house into a market.' Finally, St Paul speaks about wisdom. 'God's weakness is stronger than human strength.' This is another style again: inviting us into a mystery, almost using riddles to get us to think outside the box.

It is no surprise that the Catholic community has always valued education and done a great deal to make it accessible for people around the world. Just as God teaches us, so too do we try to share the wonderful gift of learning with others.

This week, Project Compassion brings us the story of Leaia, who lives in Samoa. With the support of Caritas Australia's local partner Caritas Samoa, a water tank was installed in Leaia's home to harvest rainwater. This means that her family can now have access to clean water to drink and bathe. The time that was previously spent walking to collect water in buckets from a neighbour down the street can now be used for other essential tasks and, most importantly, her children don't have to miss out on school. School is a doorway that opens onto a better world.

The Gospel today says that Jesus knew what a person had in them. We should try to be the same: to see the potential, not just the surface.



Leaia stands with four of her children with containers they have filled with water. Photo: Laura Womersley/ Caritas Australia

PRAYER



We pray that we will deepen our faith over the whole of our lives. May we be open to the many lessons God wants to teach us. Through Project Compassion, may we support the journey of all to fullness of life.

Amen

FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

Written by Michael McGirr

2 Chronicles 36:14–16, 19–23 | Ephesians 2:4–10 | John 3:14–21

We have all lived through a great deal of change. Even young people have seen plenty. ChatGPT is a recent development and so are electric cars. Older people can remember having a phone plugged into a socket that you couldn't carry around with you. Sometimes we have discussions about the good old days. They are often tinged with nostalgia for things we miss and gratitude for improvements. We no longer need to buy film for our cameras or change typewriter ribbons. Climate change is deeply troubling. Many medical improvements are inspiring.

Change can certainly be frightening. It can also be an occasion of great hope. Jesus seems to have understood this. Nicodemus comes across as a character who is looking for change in his life, but he is nervous about it, so he comes to see Jesus under cover of darkness. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus uses the image of being born again. Of starting all over again. It is a dramatic description of change.

Jesus says that the light has come into the world and that people prefer the same old darkness. They are set in their ways.

Every Lent, through Project Compassion, Caritas Australia asks us to help bring light into the world and to make positive change. An example is presented to us this week in the story of Memory, a young woman from rural Malawi, the eldest child in a family living at the level of subsistence farming.

Listen to some of Memory's words: 'Growing up in the village was not easy. My parents don't have a job, so they depend on farming. When the season goes wrong, we suffer a lot and become food insecure. Sometimes we need to bathe without soap. Sometimes we need to walk without shoes.'

With the support of Caritas Australia and its partner the Catholic Development Commission in Malawi (CADECOM), Memory was able to enrol at a technical college where she learnt practical skills in carpentry. A new life became possible. She can now realise her full potential and offer more to her family and her community.

Today, the letter to the Ephesians reminds us that every person is 'God's work of art.' God is the artist who never signs off on a painting but is always trying to make it better. Perhaps we can see the world in the same way.



Memory became the first female carpenter from her village in Malawi. Photo: Tim Lam/Caritas Australia.

PRAYER



We pray for all people who make things.
We thank God for their skill. May our
support of Project Compassion help
people around the world find the
opportunity to use their talents to support
their families and communities.

Amen

FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

Written by Michael McGirr

Jeremiah 31:31–34 | Ps 50:3–4. 12–5. R. v.12 | Hebrews 5:7–9 | John 12:20–33

The word 'heart' occurs almost a thousand times in the Bible, more than three times as often as the word 'soul.' Perhaps this is just another item of trivia but surely it gives us a clue about Christianity. It is a religion of the heart. It gets our blood pumping.

As we approach the climax of our Lenten journey, this week's readings ask questions about our hearts. The psalm begs 'a pure heart create for me, O God.' Those words invite the Lord to come right inside us, into the very core of our being. The prophet Jeremiah quotes the Lord as saying, 'deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their hearts.' In other words, we won't find God's most intimate whisperings to us just in books or lectures. We will find it when we are genuinely in touch with our core, our most intimate space. God's love is inscribed on our hearts.

In his letter *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis speaks against 'a culture of walls.' He asks us to treasure the hope found in every heart:

Hope 'speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning. Hope speaks to us of a thirst, an aspiration, a longing for a life of fulfillment, a desire to achieve great things, things that fill our heart and lift our spirit to lofty realities like truth, goodness and beauty, justice and love... Hope is bold.'

The word 'caritas' means love. The work of Caritas Australia is a heartfelt response to the needs of the world, one that gives expression to our shared hope. Caritas always works in partnership with others. During Lent, as we have listened to the experience of people we have helped through our support of Project Compassion, we will have noticed that life-giving partnerships with groups on the ground in many countries make this possible.

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks of the grain of wheat that must die to create a rich harvest. Of course, he is referring to his own passion. But there is a message here for us all. 'Anyone who loves their life will lose it.' We are called to wear our hearts on our sleeves. To be led by love for others.



Jen (centre) teaches a class of students as part of the Alternative Learning System (ALS). Photo: Richard Wainwright/Caritas Australia.

PRAYER

We pray for all who go out of their way to bring God's love to others, especially to those most in need. We pray in gratitude for the many partners of Caritas Australia who ensure our contributions to Project Compassion reach the places they are needed.

Amen

Isaiah 50:4–7 | Philipians 2:6–11 | Mark 14:1–15:47 or Mark 15:1–39

We see images of the cross everywhere, from school uniforms to hospital buildings. Perhaps it is so commonplace that it doesn't stop us in our tracks the way it should. The cross of Jesus is the best key we have for understanding the mystery of God's love. God's compassion for the human family took Jesus to a lonely and brutal execution. Jesus was the victim of appalling injustice and degradation. His experience asks us to try to make the world more just and to revere the dignity of every person. 'Whatsoever you do to the least of my sisters and brothers, you do to me.' This is part of the reason why Project Compassion has, for 60 years, been part of our Lenten observance.

This year, Holy Week begins with the reading of the passion story from Mark's Gospel. Even in busy lives, we should try to set time aside to spend with this extraordinary story, not to rush it. Gently take a little at a time and ask for the grace to be close to Jesus. In the Spiritual Exercises, St Ignatius asks us 'to consider how the divinity hides itself.'

One way to spend time with the passion story is to take a different character each week and quietly ponder what it looked like to them and what they may have felt. Here is a suggestion:

Sunday – Judas Iscariot

Monday – Simon Peter

Tuesday – The high priest

Wednesday – Pontius Pilate

Thursday – Simon of Cyrene

Friday – The centurion

Saturday – Mary of Magdala

Let us remember a beautiful prayer of just seven words that was taught to Pope Francis by his grandmother: Jesus, make my heart more like yours.



Clark (right) kisses his younger brother Egzy Grey on the cheek in their small home in Quezon City, Philippines.

Photo: Richard Wainwright/Caritas Australia.

PRAYER



We pray that the mystery of the death of Jesus will deepen within our hearts. May we be ready to take up the cross in our time, especially as we support those who experience injustice throughout the world.

Amen

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