



MOST REV BRIAN MASCORD
BISHOP-ELECT OF WOLLONGONG

“Giving up and taking up”

LENTEN MESSAGE 2018

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Many of us have childhood memories of Lent. For me, it was always about what I was going to be giving up, whether it would be lollies or ice cream or some other important treat that I was used to. If you were the older sibling, perhaps your “Lenten offering” was giving up being mean to an annoying younger brother or sister, or even leaving the last portion of a dessert for someone else. In my family, my parents were very practical about this time of the Church’s calendar. Yes, there was the giving up, the penance of Lent, but they saw this time as also being an opportunity to take something up, a challenge, so to speak—perhaps some radical form of kindness or deliberately going above and beyond in service to each other in the family. This is something I have tried to continue doing during my life, and I have also encouraged my parishioners to do the same.

As I soon begin this new phase of my life as your bishop, I think it is rather fitting that I begin the journey with you during Lent. What, then, am I giving up? Well, that is simple—the security and the familiarity of everything that I have known throughout my life. Certainly, when God called me to the priesthood, it was a call to walk with and shepherd the people of God. But, I never imagined that it would be as a bishop.

Now, what am I taking up? A continued openness to God’s call and the newness of what that involves. We never decide when or where God calls, only how we respond to that call.

At all times, the call of God is a radical one, to a new closeness with the God who loves us. For me, as the title of this year’s diocesan Lenten program says, it really is a “surrender”—a turning over to God, allowing God to be near and, ultimately, allowing him to work through me in this new journey to which he has called us.

There are many images that come to mind during Lent—images of the desert, solitude, fasting and prayer. But, there is also the invitation to go with Jesus. A few weeks ago, on the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time, we heard the disciples of John the Baptist ask Jesus a simple question, “Rabbi, where do you live?” (John 1:38). The response of Jesus was very simple, “Come and see” (John 1:39). Where does Jesus live in your life? Where does he dwell? At the centre? Somewhere off to the side? Perhaps we haven’t even thought about these questions for a while. The invitation of Jesus is important because we do not do this journey alone. Jesus comes with us. In today’s Gospel, the leper—the outcast, the one to be avoided—comes to Jesus for healing and, almost like a child, he simply says, “If you want to, you can heal me” (Mark 1:40). He takes nothing for granted. And Jesus responds with those beautiful words, “Of course I want to!” (Mark 1:41). You can almost imagine the smile that was on Jesus’ face.

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It might all sound a little naïve and simplistic, but that's what discipleship in Christ is all about. We invite Jesus closer and Jesus says, "Yes!" Jesus calls us out further into the deep and we respond, "Yes!" Whilst I will probably never completely let go of where I have come from, nor would I want to, because the gifts of so many people from there have formed me and come with me, I will certainly take up my new life here in Wollongong knowing that Jesus walks with me and with us. And, I pray for the grace to continue to respond with those words, "Yes! I want to."

In December 2017, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, released its report with many recommendations. Firstly, like Bishop Peter, I would like to recognise and express my gratitude to all those who came forward and courageously spoke their truth to the Royal Commission. They have given the Church a significant opportunity to reflect on how we are called to be the face of God in our world today. They have been the voice of the Spirit challenging us to be real and authentic in who we are as God's people. Whilst it has been a difficult time for all, nothing compares to the courage of victims and survivors in coming forth and speaking truth—a truth that calls for action on the part of everyone.

The recommendations of the Royal Commission call for change. Some of these changes have already occurred, or are under way, and we will continue to strive to be places of safety and security for our children and vulnerable people.

So, what are we, as the Church, giving up for this period and beyond? I believe it should be that which no longer gives life to us as God's people, and that which no longer brings healing and comfort to others. We need to be about healing, for that is what Jesus was about. He called people back to the experience of life in God. He challenged the misguided approach of the authorities of his time and he called them to rethink their approaches, just as we are being challenged to look at our approaches. He offered healing on many different levels, and we, too, must do the same. Sometimes our attempts will not go so well.

But, as followers of Jesus, we are called to keep going, to keep trying to be the healing face of Christ to others.

This process is not something that should finish with this year's Lenten journey. The journey of Lent, the journey of Christmas, the journey of Easter and the journey of Ordinary Time are not just periods in the Church's year. They are our life's journey, for they are the Paschal mystery—that is, the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus. Let us hear the invitation that we are being offered and let us give thanks for the invitation that we have been given.

I have taken as my motto, "For all things give thanks," from St Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (5:18). I do give thanks. I especially give thanks for the 16 years of faithful leadership given to the Diocese by Bishop Peter Ingham. Let us also be thankful for this time of change and possibility in our Church where we have the opportunity to again look at who we are and what we can be as we take up these opportunities that are being given to us as a faith-filled people. It won't be easy, but we don't do it alone. God walks with us and empowers us to be a sign of healing and hope in the world. As we begin our Lenten journey, let us hear the invitation of Jesus to "come and see", and in doing so, let us surrender to the love of God present to us and to those we love. Let us ask Jesus to come close and let us hear him say to us those important words, "Of course I want to!"

I look forward to meeting many of you at my Ordination on the 22nd of February, and I wish you every blessing as we begin our life together and continue to build the kingdom of God present in the Diocese of Wollongong.

I wish you a blessed Lent. May it be a time of growth and love.

Yours in Christ



Most Rev Brian G Mascord
Bishop-elect of Wollongong

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