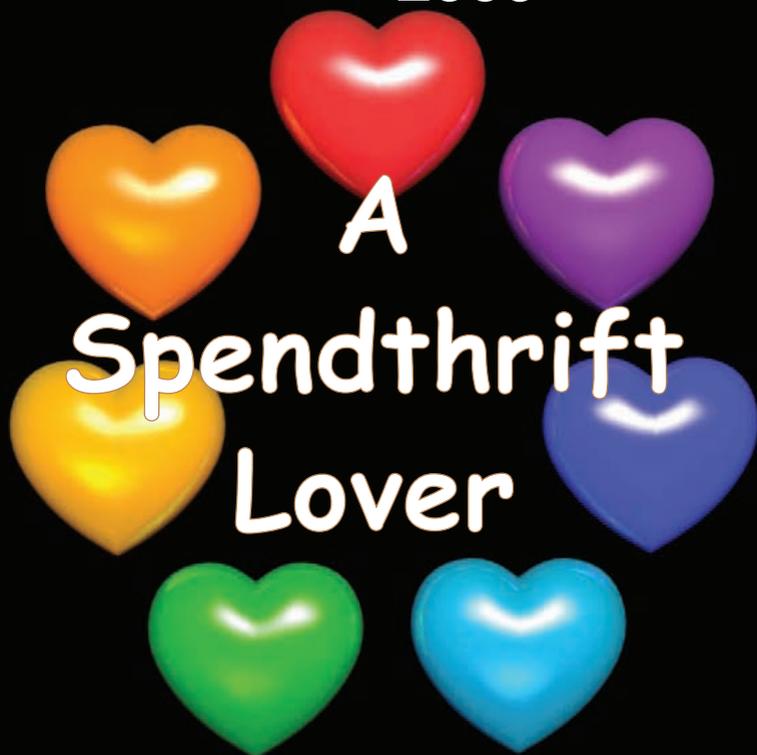


2010 LENT BOOK

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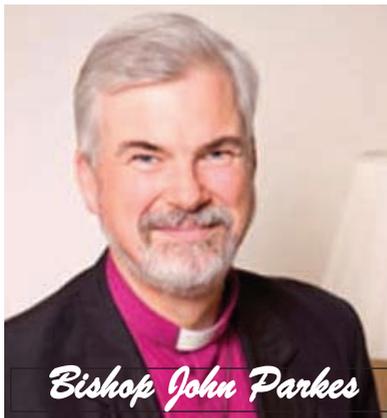
A Spendthrift Lover

The extravagant generosity of God

Bishop John Parkes

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Shortly after I accepted the invitation to write these 2010 Lenten Study materials, the Diocese of Wangaratta was overwhelmed by the crisis of Black Saturday and its aftermath. Parishes which were already struggling, some without clergy leadership found themselves in the middle of the Maelstrom. Through Marysville, Kilmore, Yea and Alexandra in the south, and Beechworth, Yackandandah and Alpine Anglican in the north, fires raged, property was destroyed lives were lost, and the very fabric of security and certainty was ripped apart.

I had been the Bishop for less than three months. From the joy of my installation and the hope of new beginnings I was plunged into the challenge of overseeing practical care and struggling to make what meaning could be made from the painful and tragic circumstances which unfolded before us. Glib claims to religious certainty seemed strangely hollow when confronted

with people who had lost everything - even their identity. The agony of those first few days in the recovery centre at Alexandra will live with me forever.

Since these events I have reflected long and hard on faith, providence and prayer. It is against this backdrop that I offer these studies – for my reflection has taken me again on that quintessential Lenten journey, from the recognition afresh of human contingency to the celebration anew of the abundance of God’s grace.

The imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday, with the invocation, ‘Remember mortal that from dust you came and unto dust you shall return,’ could not have had a more poignant context than it did this year. The ashes were not just last year’s palm crosses – they were houses and churches, fences and sheds, people and animals. And they were hopes and dreams, opportunities and challenges and all the potential which the future seems to hold out. The myth of human autonomy had been exploded, and human frailty and human sinfulness most cruelly exposed by the events we had lived through.

Darkness and light stand in stark relief through the experience of the fires, and it’s appropriate that we start the journey acknowledging the reality of Night in human experience. This was a time for silence, not for words; a time to sit

with the full enormity of what was taking place. The unending shrill chatter of the media seemed too trivial a response to the overwhelming nature of the experience of human suffering.

But Lent is not a time to sit fixated on ourselves and our brokenness. It is a journey we are on – a journey from darkness to light, from death to life, from endings to new beginnings. The goal of our Lenten journey is to renew and to refresh our awareness of the overwhelming generosity of the grace of God. Lent prepares us afresh for the encounter with the risen Christ – and challenges us with the outrageous affirmation that all that diminishes destroys or undermines life in all its fullness has been healed and restored and renewed by God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

A few weeks after the fires I drove along the Melba Highway past Marysville. Already the tree ferns had started to reappear. And in the weeks and months following Black Saturday I have again and again been reminded of the hints of resurrection already taking place. The enormous generosity of the nation in its response to the appeals; the outstanding courage and tenacity of the CFA workers; the dedication of those volunteers who came to rebuild fences; the quiet courage of ordinary folk as they went about the task of rebuilding their lives; gifts of time and skill and prayer and care

too many to name – that represent the most enormous outpouring of love and empathy. Our generous God is already supplying our needs, and will continue to do so until the whole creation is caught up renewed and fulfilled.

And so these reflections on the Gospel readings for the Sundays of Lent. Beginning at the point of human contingency; our dependence on God for all we are, all we have, and all we have in us to become. And then this extraordinary journey through the generosity of our bountiful; God. Wilfully free and abundant, our God blesses and blesses and continues to bless. And calls us to be people of abundant – even foolish generosity; giving ourselves to God's service and living each day in love to one another and to God.

It is my hope and prayer that as you take this journey with me, you will discover anew the myriad of ways in which your life has been blessed by God. No life is without challenge, pain, a measure of tragedy; but if that's all we see then we've missed half the story – dare I say it the most important half.

May you make a good Lent – and may you encounter anew the foolish generosity of God – for our God is a spendthrift Lover.

+John Wangaratta.

The group will work better if it takes time to meet before the first study to attend to some basic housekeeping.

- Appoint a facilitator
- Decide where and when you will meet – and stick to the timetable unless you absolutely have to change. Newcomers especially don't need the stress of different times and places.
- Agree some simple group norms – respectful listening, no problem solving, no dominating group time, making space for all to have a say, confidentiality – what is said to the group stays with the group.
- Discuss the need for commitment to the group – stable membership in an important ingredient in making the process work.
- Clarify arrangements for refreshments – which should not become a competition to see who can cater best!
- Clarify needs for transport.
- Identify any significant events or milestones to be celebrated during the life of the group
- Take time to get to know one another. It's not safe to assume that you know the other members of the group even if you are accustomed to going to church with them. Each member of the group might share one special thing about themselves that they are comfortable to share, and one expectation they have from being in the group.
- Pray together and for each other.

For the first week, prayerfully read Luke 4.1-13, and the study notes. Note anything which occurs to you in preparation for sharing.

For the next five weeks, we agree to the following commitment as a group.

ATTENDANCE:

To give priority to group meetings.

PARTICIPATION:

To make every effort to participate fully within the group.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

To keep confidential everything that is shared.

ACCOUNTABILITY:

To accept the challenge to reach the goals we have set ourselves.

ACCESSIBILITY:

To give one another the right to call at any time for spiritual help in time of need - even in the middle of the night.

EVANGELISM:

To make an effort to each encourage one person to join this group.



SPECIFICS

We will meet on(Day of week)

We will meet at(Home/Place)

The meeting will begin at..... and close at

We agree to all have left by to not over stay our welcome.

GROUND RULES

Refreshments

Baby Sitting

Newcomers.....

Absence.....

I WILL TRY WITH GOD'S HELP TO BE A REGULAR, FAITHFUL, CARING MEMBER OF THIS GROUP.

Names of Group Members

Phone

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Remember: *While it is best to enjoy these studies from week one, you may like to encourage new people to join the group along the way. This may be a way of introducing them to home groups in the parish.*

superficial moralising. But there's nothing superficial, nothing trivial about this – this is a simple faith dying in the face of absolute evil, incapable of knowing that a more profound faith is maturing in the silence of agony.

Is there not here a problem for Christians? We talk of the light coming into to the world. Where was the light when the six million Jews were obliterated in the holocaust and God died for Elie Wiesel? In the face of the experience of another of radical evil, glib claims to religious certainty seem strangely hollow.

We can speak too soon. Simone Weil said that the danger of the imagination was that it filled up the void when what we need is to learn how to live in the presence of the void.

The line shines. But it can be deucedly difficult to detect in the present. Rowan Williams tells us that God always has to be rediscovered: which means that God always has to be heard or seen where there aren't yet words for God.

What can we do, what can we say, in the face of this paradox?

First we can choose to live in the presence of God, choose for ourselves to come to the light, stand in the light. Faith must be so much more than mere words. It needs to

be lived out, loved out, prayed out, worked out. Talk can actually distance us from a life of faith.

Second, we can take care about what we say. In John's Gospel we hear the story of the woman taken in adultery. When the accusation is made, Jesus writes on the ground with his finger. He does not rush into words. He pauses in silence, refusing to make for people the sense they want. In the silence he gives them space and time to see themselves differently. And when he lifts his head there is a word both of judgment and release.

The light shines. By grace may we live in that light, may we reflect that light and transmit that light. May we stand in the light even when in the face of the reality of experience, ours or others, words escape us. And when we do speak, may we take care that our words are words of light and not words of darkness masquerading as light.



Introduction and Welcome.

Opening Prayer.

Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have made,
and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent:
create and make in us new and contrite hearts,
that we, worthily lamenting our sins,
and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may obtain of you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Connecting.

This is a chance for each member of the group to share briefly what is going on for them – what has happened since the last meeting – what joys sorrows or anxieties they bring with them. (15 minutes)



Reading. (10 minutes)

Read slowly Luke 4.1-13, each member reading a sentence.

Then read the study on pages 6 & 7



Questions for reflection and discussion.

1. What does darkness mean to you?
 - Were you afraid of the dark as a child?
 - Did you sleep with the light on (in recent times)?
 - Do you ever feel unsafe being outdoors at night?Share your thoughts.





2. Jesus was confronted by Satan immediately after his baptism. It was whilst he was full of the Holy Spirit that he encountered the tempter. His resistance came through the words of Scripture.
Have you been tested in your spiritual journey – just when you thought you were making progress has your resolve been undermined? If so, how did you react? What reassured you?

3. St. John of the Cross writes of the dark night of the soul, the painful experience that people endure as they seek to grow in spiritual maturity and union with God. Less a testing than a state of desolation, this is, I think, what Weisel is describing in the passage from Night.
 - Have you experienced the dark night of the soul?
 - Where did you find comfort and inspiration?
 - What growth can you point to from this experience?

4. How do you explain the existence of evil in the world?
Is God silent – or absent?
 - What does it mean to live in the presence of the void?
 - How do we share our faith with those who are suffering?

5. What does it mean to live in the light?
In what ways do our words and our actions bear witness to our faith?

6. Is your faith individual and private – a matter between you and God?
Or is it corporate, worked out in the Church in relationship, conversation, worship and service? Discuss if you are happy to share



My Journal

Spend a little quiet time to consider the discussion you have had with this study, and jot down any key points you would like to further explore privately or questions you would like to ask your Parish Priest.



Closing prayers

A time for members of the group to pray as they feel lead, ending with

God of the new and eternal covenant,
As the forty days of the great flood
swept away the world's corruption
and watered new beginnings of righteousness and life;
grant to us, who are washed clean and born again
in the saving flood of baptism, the wellspring of your grace,
that your gift of new life may flourish once again;
through Jesus Christ our Redeemer,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen



Refreshments.



For next week: Spend some time each day reflecting on the Gospel reading Luke 9:28-36, (37-43). Try and write down an experience you have had of the presence of God which has overwhelmed you?

**Darkness cannot drive out
darkness; only light can do
that. Hate cannot drive out
hate; only love can do that.**

Martin Luther King, Jr.

