

The First Sorrowful Mystery: The Agony in the Garden

They suffered with Him in the garden, unheard while we slept.

The Royal Commission has now listened, analysed, and finally recommended. Shocking revelations confronted us day after day. But as Christ suffered in the garden, his disciples slept; so there is a risk the cries of the vulnerable may still go unheard. Such deafness from the Church or community further isolates the victims, reduces their freedom, denies them recovery. Few are more vulnerable to the suffocation of their voices than children and young people.

The vulnerability of young people and deafness of older ones enabled appalling abuse in the past. To our eternal shame, all too many of the perpetrators were clergy, religious or lay church-workers, those who should have been especially solicitous of the needs of the weak. It appals and shames us. We are ashamed and angered by the Pilate-like refusal of those leaders who failed to respond. And we are troubled by any systemic failure behind this. Above all, our hearts go out to victims who were forced to carry their pain alone and in silence.

Our Lord sweats blood in the garden for all those innocents who like him go unheard. He returns to find us asleep and challenges us: "Could you not watch with me even one hour?" But the night is not yet over. Now he has woken us, we must choose whether to stay awake and accompany the victims hereafter, or return to our former lassitude.

Jesus, by the merits of your lonely agony, have mercy on us and all who feel abandoned this night.

The Second Sorrowful Mystery: The Scourging at the Pillar

They sought safety and healing, and were abused in body and spirit.

The bruising of Jesus' body reminds us of those who've been abused in body and spirit by those who exploited their power over them. It was a catastrophe for those victims, demanding justice and reparation, compassion and healing. It was a calamity for our community, culture, institutions, requiring legal and cultural change. And it was also a moral and spiritual crisis, demanding moral and spiritual remedies. We keep seeking reconciliation with survivors, families, the faithful, the community. We keep seeking healing for them also. This requires reparation, both material and spiritual. It requires prayer and fasting for the purification of the Church, especially this Lent. And so as Archbishop I commit to this before God and his people, inviting you all to hold me to account for this.

Today I ask the bishops, clergy, religious and lay faithful of Sydney to join me in dedicating each Friday of Lent and perhaps beyond to participating in Confession and Mass, abstaining from meat, reading Holy Scripture, taking part in a Holy Hour, or in other ways praying for the victims of abuse and renewal of the Church. As these crimes cry out to heaven, so it is to heaven that we must look for wisdom and repair. But Lent says we each can play our part in making amends. When Jonah called the city of Nineveh to repentance, the whole community, even those innocent of personal wrongdoing, knew they were connected and somehow contaminated. So they all put on sackcloth and ashes, and all fasted, out of shame, humility, repentance (Jon ch 3).

Jesus, by the merits of your painful scourging, have mercy on us and all whose have been abused as you were.

The Third Sorrowful Mystery: The Crowning with Thorns

We have ridiculed the Lamb of God, and we are ashamed.

The suffering Jesus was ridiculed and ignored. So, too, many victims of abuse. The Church, too, has now been held up to scrutiny, even scorn, and cannot pretend the record of its members was always innocent. Some, we know, did better than others. And there has been real reform: better support for survivors, attempts to give them voice, proactively training people in safeguarding, educating the Catholic community. But the credibility of the Church's ministers has been terribly damaged.

The temptation is to become defensive or self-obsessed. But by God's grace, the prompting of the community, and the input of survivors, the Church can emerge from this purified, humbler, more compassionate. After pruning comes growth, after the Cross Resurrection: this is our Paschal wisdom and hope. As the Psalmist put it: "They go out, they go out, full of tears, carrying seed for the sowing: they come back, they come back, full of song, carrying their sheaves." (Psalm 125)

A first step on this road is recognising the rights of children, vulnerable adults, the indigenous, refugees, trafficked, unborn or otherwise powerless, to be seen and heard, respected and loved. We all share this responsibility. From now on we must be more alert to harm and respond appropriately. Christ is pierced by thorns, mocked with a pretend crown, made scapegoat for our sins. Do we join the jeering and indifferent crowd as he is harmed again in God's 'little ones'? Or will we, like the holy women, follow him to the cross, and proclaim his innocence and their love where we can?

Jesus, you know the humiliation of not being believed. Have mercy on us and all who cry out for justice.

The Fourth Sorrowful Mystery: The Carrying of the Cross

They have carried a terrible cross, now we must carry it with them.

People rarely choose their crosses: they are imposed by circumstances or the actions of others. As we pray tonight, we remember those survivors of abuse who have had a terrible cross thrust upon them.

Simon of Cyrene was for a while forced to carry Christ's cross for him. The present generation of Christians have also inherited shame, loss of credibility, responsibility for the harms done, often decades ago. They must now ensure cultural and institutional change to our Church to proof it against this ever happening again. That will require lasting change in our patterns of thought and behaviour, often long-ingrained, even unconscious. There is no silver bullet, no easy answer to all this. But only by self-examination and rededication to Gospel service will we again deserve people's trust. Only by joining Simon in carrying the crosses of others, above all, by joining Christ on his Way of Sorrows.

While making his way to the cross, Jesus encountered the women of Jerusalem weeping for him: "But turning to them Jesus said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, rather weep for yourselves and for your children'." (Lk 23:28) Even as we weep for ourselves, determined to work with Christ in renewing the Church, we remain focused on the young people past and present.

Jesus, on your journey to Calvary you carried with your cross the weight of our sins and won for us the grace of endurance and renewal. Have mercy on us and on all those innocents with crosses to bear.

The Fifth Sorrowful Mystery: The Crucifixion

The death of Christ offers us the choice of the two thieves: which are we?

The great theologian Saint Anselm once asked 'Why did God become human?' and he answered for the whole Church: 'To redeem us, to change us, to save us from our sins.' The Lenten message is this: everything changes, because God has become one of us and joined us in our suffering and grief. Everything changes, because God has died for us and offered us redemption for all we've done and failed to do. Everything changes, because God has risen from the dead to make a way for us to the Father.

Everything changes – but only if we let it. Only if we repent of past wrongs and embrace a new path. In Lent we hang beside Christ on the cross and must choose which thief we will be; the one who in his pride mocked him or the one who had the humility to ask Christ to redeem him. In the depths of our being we crave the response the Good Thief received: "Today you will be with me in paradise". We crave that also for all the innocent victims of abuse. For those who have died, some tragically by suicide when they could bear no more. For those still suffering a crucifixion. And for those finding some measure of healing.

The same Jesus who modelled the deepest love and respect for the powerless, gave hope also to outcasts, and to sinners a brighter future. By the power of the cross everything changes. But the Church in every age and each believer must decide; which thief will I be, as I hang with Christ upon the cross?

Father, by the merits of the crucifixion and death of Jesus, have mercy on us as we acknowledge our own brokenness.