

# Along the track

## Ash Wednesday

Most Australians know a lot about ashes. For thousands and thousands of years, the first people of this nation used fire as a tool to 'care for country'. When Europeans came, we largely ignored those methods to our peril and bushfires became a destructive force across much of the country. It is only in recent times that we have begun to learn lessons by 'sitting in the ashes' as it were, heeding the wisdom of the past and learning the lessons of today. For example, until recent times, fire was used very effectively in farming sugar cane in North Queensland. Controlled burning to reduce undergrowth is now a regular part of fire prevention management, as it was for thousands of years before settlement. In fire prone areas, where and how we build houses is changing. All lessons learned from the ashes.

And so, each year we celebrate Ash Wednesday, we stop to learn the lessons from the ashes.

It is not simply for convenience sake that the palms from last year's celebration of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem are burnt to provide the ashes for Ash Wednesday. Obviously, the symbolism of that action is a reminder that all of us will die and that the trappings of importance and wealth, of fame and adulation don't mean all that much – eventually they all pass. We hear the words, remember you are dust and unto dust you will return. Pretty sobering thought! But every now and then we need to sit in the ashes, not as some maudlin exercise in self-pity but to get our priorities right, to take stock of where we are personally and what is important to us.

Driving through country devastated by fire can be a very confronting experience. It can be frightening. How terrifying it must have been for those who were there in the fire! Then, driving through that country weeks later, green shoots are appearing and signs of life are returning. Even out of such powerful destruction, new life emerges and with that comes hope and renewal. Sitting in the ashes gives us a chance to see the signs of renewal in my life, where I find hope and perhaps discover what are the signs for joy and gratitude? In so many of those places devastated by fire, a strong sense of community emerged, a desire to care for one another, to come to know one another, to be a listening ear, to help where one another rebuild homes and lives.

So what are the lessons of the ashes for you this year?

Sitting in the ashes is an ancient symbol of mourning and repentance, of loss and a reminder of death. It also carries with it the idea that sometimes there is some inner work that is best done in a time of being alone, even in a time of sadness or even heaviness of heart and that we need sometimes to embrace these times. There are times when we may need to feel some powerlessness, to feel that we need others, to understand that we are not in complete control. Sometimes it is in these times when we feel emptiness, we can feel our need for God. Sometimes we need the space, the quiet withdrawal that sitting in the ashes can offer.

We can stop there, if we choose. We can choose mourning or we can choose to give thanks for the gift of those who have died, we can give thanks for the gift of life itself. Or we can see repentance as a time for renewal, for a change of mind and heart.

Isn't it interesting that those who threw palms and cloaks in front of Jesus as he entered Jerusalem and hailed him as the messiah, a few short days later bayed for his blood – crucify him, they yelled. Kill him. What changed? How could they be so welcoming and then almost immediately turn into a cruel and unruly mob. And they didn't even have social media!! Sitting in the ashes can also be a time to take stock of where we are going as a community, what sort of culture we want to create, what sort of priorities are important to us, what or who are the main influences on our lives. Have we become like this crowd in Jerusalem, choosing one way, then heading off in a new direction because that's where the mob is heading?

Regards

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