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ASH WEDNESDAY

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ;

On Ash Wednesday, we hear the voice of God through the prophet Joel: "return to me with all your heart" (Joel 2:12). These words were an invitation to the people of ancient Israel, a people who had wandered far from the ways of their God. And still, no matter how far they wandered, God was always there, loving them, accompanying them on their journey, calling them back, welcoming them home.

The Prophet Joel continues, "return to me with all your heart" with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning" (Joel 2:12). What's all this about? It's one thing to hear the call of God to return, but why "with fasting, with weeping and with mourning?" These words express one of the key themes of Scripture, the theme of lament. Our ancestors in faith had to make sense of the blood, sweat and tears that so often marked their history; and sometimes the only response in the face of unspeakable suffering is to lament, to cry, to mourn for what we have lost. Just as the people of Israel had to lament, to get it all out, to give expression to their grief and sorrow—and to their desire to make amends—so do we, both personally and as a Church.

When we lament like this, we also recognize, on some deep level, that our God is a faithful God; God walks with us even—or perhaps especially-- in our hard times and in our times of sorrow, rage, regret, depression, confusion and crisis. God accompanies us, and will never leave us to face our trials alone. Part of what it means to come back to God with all our heart is to learn this truth again and again, for it seems that we human beings can never fully grasp the wonder and mystery of a God who loves us no matter what, when we do good as well as when we do wrong and when we stray from God's ways, and always walks with us, forgives us and calls us to more. That's why the Church offers us the season of Lent every year.

Lent is an opportunity to engage in a renewed dialogue between God and us. God wants to accompany us, wants to walk beside us, wants to forgive us, and is always ready to forgive, if only we acknowledge our wrongdoing. God also wants to hear our deepest questions, which at times we hardly dare to ask. Where is God in the midst of the mess? How can we dare to hope, when things seem so out of control? Is there healing for wounds that seem incurable? Has the Church lost touch with the real Jesus, or with real people? Does love really have the last word? These and many others are the questions God wants us to acknowledge, the questions God wants to hear, especially through the Lenten season. Asking these questions of God is part of what it means to come back to God with all our heart, hiding nothing.

As God walks with us, so we must walk with each other, as sisters and brothers, companions on the journey. This Season of Lent, I invite you to allow God to walk with you, to hear your questions, your doubts, your longings and your sorrows. Return to God, who is always there for you. And, in addition, listen to those around you. Listen to their questions, doubts, longings and sorrows. In your accompaniment, you may be the Gospel your neighbour needs to hear.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

MOST REVEREND MARTIN W. CURRIE, D.D.

Archbishop of St. John's