

**A PASTORAL LETTER
FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER
FOR ALL THE CHURCHES IN CARLISLE**



**Appointed to be read at all weekend Public Masses in the
Diocese of Lancaster, on the weekend of 29 February and 1 March 2020**

Lent Pastoral (Year A)

My dear people,

The term 'self-isolate' has become familiar to us all in recent weeks in connection with the threat to life posed by the corona-virus. Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, in some way 'self-isolated' when faced with the threat to eternal life posed by sin. He was led into the wilderness not to avoid contact but to prepare to do battle with the enemy. We must take seriously risks to life. We must take even more seriously risks to eternal life.

The Church has been entrusted with a beautiful treasure, the command to go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News. The Good News is the saving presence of Christ who, through His once and for all Sacrifice, has delivered a 'knock-out' blow to the devil. He has opened the way to heaven, and sends out His disciples to declare to all peoples, 'the way is now clear!'

As He was sent by the Father, so He sends us. But just as Our Lord was not always found amongst the crowds so it must be with His disciples. He withdrew, to be alone with the Father in intimate prayer. We too must find ways to withdraw to be alone with the Father. For Our Lord such times were not just important; they were essential. And so, from the earliest times personal prayer has been at the heart of every Christian's life, and the Holy Season of Lent has been at the heart of the life of the Church. It is a time of 'self-isolation' with the Father, an act provoked by the Holy Spirit.

Sin did not end with the Resurrection. It has staggered to its feet and is intent on doing maximum damage to as many as possible in whatever time it has left. The Church must keep up its guard. Hold in mind the image of Christ appearing to turn His back on the crowds, the sick, the troubled, those in despair, those burdened by guilt, those who have lost hope, those weary with life, those who are afraid. Why would He turn His back on you?

I believe that much in our society has turned its back on eternal life. It says this life, this world, is all we have. We must get our heaven here, and we must achieve it ourselves. Celebrity is the new sainthood.

Tragically, the Church is bedevilled by scandals, crippled by factions and in-fighting. Her voice is all but silenced. Her authority to speak out is compromised. Her respect has been tarnished. We fear to be known as believers, as Mass-goers. We are having a lesson in humility.

Everyone carries deep within their hearts and souls a nostalgia for the garden of Eden, for Paradise, because we are created in the image and likeness of God. We are called to share the

life of the Blessed Trinity, and to know a life with nothing to spoil it. Without faith that life is beyond our imagining; without a saviour it is certainly beyond our hope.

Comfort is found in the humble remnant. Few though they are they still carry faithfully the message and Light of the Gospel. Christ remains present, His Good News unchanged, still an option, an offer for those who hear it and embrace it in their need. Good News is designed for sad people.

This Lent I would like us all to take up the Way of the Cross as our Lenten devotion. Take it up not as a penance or a hardship but as a joy. As a young child going to Mass with the family our regular place was next to the fourth station, Jesus meets His Mother. This Station still carries special memories of family and childhood and having a place. Let us try to find a place for the Stations of the Cross in our lives.

Many years ago as a young priest in St Cuthbert's, Blackpool, a parishioner gave a painting of the Crucifixion to the parish. It was unusual because the artist had presented the scene as if he was positioned just behind the Cross, looking past Our Lord's head towards the on-lookers. You could see Mary and St John and the executioners and the women, but he had cleverly given other figures the features of his family and those he knew. He has given one his own features. Let us try to find a place for our lives within the Stations of the Cross.

Our parishes and convents will arrange regular times to pray the Stations of the Cross. Make the effort to join them. If you have not done this before let this Lent be a new start. I also recommend praying them personally, privately, either in your churches or at home. Perhaps spread them through the working day, in the morning, at break, at midday, afternoon, evening and last thing as you prepare to retire. Many different meditations are available to suite different personalities. It could be enough to have the images before you and you simply spend a little time looking at each. Try to be drawn into the scenes. The more creative of you may even try writing your own meditations.

Prayer, fasting and concern for the poor are the three essential elements of a good Lent, but prayer is the first. Perhaps if we take that more seriously the other elements will be more fruitful. Some have no choice about giving up food. Others have their wealth and possessions taken from them. Many of us still have the luxury of making a choice in these things.

Mary knew the mission of her Son. She knew why He entered the wilderness, why He had to be taken from her, why He had to suffer. She also knew the sins of the people and the almost overwhelming futility of trying to live a life of Faith. But she remained faithful, gathered with that little remnant of disciples, patient, attentive, hopeful. May the Mother of all hope walk closely with each of you this Lent to bring you and those you pray for safe into the new season of Resurrection.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Paul Swarbrick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+ Paul Swarbrick
Bishop of Lancaster

P.S. A good Confession would not do any harm either! Decide when you will go.