

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER



For the Second Sunday of Advent 6th December 2020

My Dear People,

A single desire lies in our hearts and is beautifully captured by the simple cry, 'Come Lord Jesus!' It is spoken with greater intensity in this short season of Advent, but it is a cry we utter in every season of the year and every season of our lives. Made in the image and likeness of God, we long to see the face of God our creator.

This Pastoral message, following the tradition set by my predecessors, carries a dual purpose. Firstly, to build the unity of the Diocese as it is shared across our parishes and homes. Secondly, it will give a focus for our lives, encouraging us to reflect above all on the second coming of our Saviour.

Our lives seem currently to be dominated by at least three massive uncertainties; the effects of Covid-19, the effects of Brexit, and the effects of damaged ecology. As Christians, we can counterbalance these uncertainties with the certainty of Our Lord's victory achieved by His love. This is more than clever words. He achieved it by acts. He achieved it by taking flesh, by His ministry, by His Passion and Glorious Resurrection. This is what our lives are dominated by, above and beyond all uncertainties. But our Faith can be weak, and our witness can fail, and we can become scared, and even those who lead us can cause us to question.

St. John the Baptist is a key figure in the life of Our Lord. Even in the womb he responded to Christ's presence. He prepared the way for the Lord, and baptised Him. He encouraged his own disciples to leave him and follow Christ. We hear the Baptist in today's Gospel, 'at the top of his game', as it were.

In lockdown and its subsequent tiers we look for ways of coping, remaining strong for others, doing what we can to lift those who have fallen. NHS staff, teachers, carers and many other professionals have done outstanding work. I commend Clergy, Religious and Lay Faithful for ensuring that people have access to the Blessed Sacrament for prayer in spite of the severe restrictions imposed. I thank those who have written to MPs expressing concern that churches have suffered too severe a lockdown. I commend those who look after families, especially the young, elderly and vulnerable.

I think of St. John the Baptist later in his life in lockdown, having been arrested for his outspoken criticism of Herod. Even strong people have their limits, and St. John

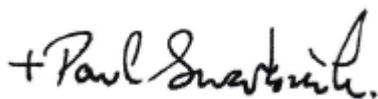
reached a point of doubt. He sent a message to Jesus asking, *'Are you the one who is to come, or do we look for another?'* The answer he received did not change his circumstances, but it did give him new heart.

Christmas can be a point of convergence for three aspects of our lives; past, present and future. From the past we draw memories and lessons, knowing we can't go back. The future is shrouded in questions, a feast for the imagination. A variety of futures lie before us, depending on how we make choices, and how events beyond our control affect us. So, what of the present, the 'here and now'?

'Christianity is not an ideal to be aimed for but a reality to be shared.' What we have been given matters. What have we been given in our many forms of lockdown? A verse from Psalm 18 is worth remembering; *'He brought me forth into freedom. He saved me because He loved me.'* We desire freedom, but some little thought leads us to realise that what matters most is that He loves us. Freedom without His love is no freedom; to know He loves us assures our most desired freedom.

In previous Advents I have encouraged us all to have a crib at the centre of decorations in our homes, and perhaps even in our places of work. This year I encourage the same. This year I also encourage you to make every effort to attend and celebrate Mass, but this will be difficult for some. So I encourage you to get to Mass within the Octave (eight days) of Christmas. I also encourage you to keep Christmas going, even up to 2nd February, the beautiful Feast of Candlemas, when Christmastide concludes. Carry the light and hope of our ultimate freedom into the New Year. Carry it joyfully through all the restrictions, trials and uncertainties of this life, knowing the utter certainty of victory through Christ's love.

With my blessing on you all, especially on those who are experiencing particular hardships.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+Paul Swain". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

+Paul

Bishop of Lancaster