

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER



For Good Shepherd Sunday weekend 4/5/May 2020

My dear People,

It would be easy to begin by focussing on the problem dominating the news, but that temptation must be resisted. Not long ago the news was dominated by another subject; BREXIT. We got tired of it, made a joke of it, prayed for it to go away, and now look! Living in the world we are affected by the course of current events to a greater or lesser degree, but, as people of Faith, our roots are found in richer soil.

I am writing this as we approach the end of Easter Week. My news is dominated by the fact that Jesus is risen from the dead, and has come back to us. He has not brought a detailed description of 'life on the other side'. Rather, He brings a simple, one-word message, 'Peace!'. Before His Passion and the immediate horrors of Holy Week, He gave explicit teaching on the nature of His peace, giving important details in a passage recorded by St John.

'Peace I bequeath to you, My own peace I give you. A peace the world cannot give, this is My gift to you.' John 14:27

His gift of His peace was not just for those disciples at that time. It is for us, and for these times, and for all times.

To be caught up in a national emergency taking place within a global crisis is new ground for many of us. Knowing how to cope, how to respond, how to plan can be daunting. Having said that, there is something very attractive when I realise that, as a Catholic Christian, I am asked to do nothing new; only have faith in Christ. Remember that Faith, return to that Faith, look after that Faith, practise that Faith.

There will be personal, social and economic consequences caused by the pandemic that will take years to adjust to. Loss of family members, lost jobs, lost businesses create a new landscape within which we will have to live. At the moment, the streets are strangely quiet and, on the face of it, peaceful, but we are aware too of intense activity and anxiety in health care, in hospitals and care homes, to whom we owe a huge debt of thanks. More broadly, mental health cries out for attention. We are conscious of isolated, hidden individuals, silently struggling with all the uncertainties of Covid-19. Politicians, leaders and scientists grapple with how to manage society in order to protect social order so that we come through the next weeks and months as well as possible. We are living in fog, and can as yet only speculate on how long it will be before it begins to thin and lift. Even then, we don't know if it will return.

The Church is the guardian and keeper of the Easter Mysteries. The relevance of these Mysteries brings reassurance not only to ourselves as believers. The soul is beyond the reach of this particular virus. Whilst we follow the instructions to STAY AT HOME :

PROTECT THE NHS : SAVE LIVES, we remember the gift of the life of the Spirit. It is a reality easily lost sight of if we allow ourselves to become dominated by news headlines. Our Blessed Lord patiently waits for us to remember, rediscover and return.

Prayer at home is being given a new lease of life. Please God, this will be a happy and lasting legacy of the crisis. Through various means efforts are being made throughout the parishes of the Diocese to look after each other and keep us true to pastoral care. This is not solely the responsibility of the clergy, although they obviously have to be active in many new ways. I am grateful for all being done in families to help keep us faithful to preserving Sunday as the Lord's Day. With so much 'on offer' via the internet it is important to use discretion regarding what we turn to and what we use. But there are vast numbers of parishioners who either cannot or prefer not to use online aids. We cannot presume this service is available to everyone. The wise pastor does not 'put all his eggs in one basket'!

I am immensely grateful for all who are simply going about the business of doing whatever they can to make sure our diocese, parishes and schools continue to function. Education, Tribunal, Health, Safeguarding, Finance, Property, Websites and Voice all still require attention. I commend those parishioners who have arranged to make their financial contributions through Direct Debit. (It would be wonderful if even more changed to this arrangement.) I thank God for our convents, engaged in various apostolates within the Diocese, all witnessing to the beauty of Religious Life. May they continue to shine as beacons of joy in the Risen Lord.

Please keep our seminarians in your prayers. They are in very unusual circumstances, and could easily find this unwelcome disturbance to their formation troubling. Pray for Stuart Chapple due to be ordained deacon in June, for Philip Wrigley in his fourth year of formation, Simon Marley two terms into his pro-paedeutic year at Valladolid, Spain, and for James Knight undergoing an extended time of discernment at St Clare's, Preston. Dare to hope for an increase of vocations to the Priesthood as a fruit of our present sacrifices.

In conclusion, I take this opportunity to thank you for the many expressions of support and encouragement I have received. Enforced isolation comes with certain consolations, and I am fortunate to live in generous accommodation with pleasant gardens, thanks to the hard work and foresight of Bishop Campbell. As a Diocese we were already facing the need to make adjustments. Present constraints only emphasise the need for decisions. All will be done with God's guidance, and in order for us to continue living our Faith, carrying the unchanging Good News of Christ's Resurrection into the days ahead. We have the example of those who have gone before us, those who have completed their work. Above all, we have the example of Christ, the Good Shepherd who never leaves His flock untended. The Lord calls on us, to follow Him with charity and prayer in the Light of Easter.

With my blessing for each of you,

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

+ Paul, Bishop of Lancaster.