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APPOINTED TO BE READ AT ALL PUBLIC MASSES IN ALL CHURCHES AND CHAPELS IN THE DIOCESE OF LANCASTER ON THE WEEKEND OF 17th – 18th February 2024

Pastoral Letter First Sunday of Lent 2024.

My dear people,

Lent can be used by some as an opportunity to recover New Year's resolutions that have gone a little astray. Being able to see evidence of progress and having 'targets' can be useful, but before we dash off to the bathroom scales note that our Blessed Lord offers us another target, far more valuable even if our progress is more difficult to measure. Stay with me.

Can you picture Jesus as He turns his back on the crowds, on Mary, on His family, neighbours and strangers, and walks away towards a vast empty wasteland? No shepherds' paths go there, no isolated villages are found there.

For thirty years He has lived anonymously amongst those to whom He had been sent, that He might save them from sin. Those hidden years of waiting are now over, but if He is to be fit for the task ahead, there is this final great act of intense preparation, His time in the wilderness. As yet, He has performed no public miracles, given no teaching and told none of His parables. Nor has He gathered any disciples or followers.

Picture Him as He slips away alone, hardly noticed by the majority whose attention is on the river and the figure of the Baptist. Watch, because what He is doing is done for you and for countless others. Watch, because in fact He takes you with Him. And as you see Him entering that wilderness know that, in fact, He is entering another wilderness, the wilderness that is the human heart, your heart. Saint Mark tells us that He will find that wilderness already occupied.

He will find Satan there, the Spoiler, the Tempter, who claims your heart as his. Jesus will find there the 'wild beasts' of your emotions, ambitions and beliefs all grown wild. He will find greed and grief and fear and so much else that refuses to be satisfied, so much that harms us from within. But these He will set Himself to tame.

He will find there the angels, given to us by a loving Father, the first prophets of hope and a better life, our dear friends and servants since the moment of our conception.



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Prayer, fasting and sharing with the poor are the time-tested traditions of Lent that we will put into practice this Lent, with hopes of driving out the devil, taming the beasts and putting us at one with the angels. But these are not the aims or goals for a successful Lent, they are only the means of achieving a far greater goal; the goal of knowing more intimately – or perhaps for the first time – the heart of the loving Father who sent His only Son to save us and share His life with us.

You and I have many concerns competing for our time and attention. Family, work, friends, matters of social justice and charity. The sheer quantity and complexity can overwhelm and weary us, unless we first set ourselves to know the Lord and something of His love. You must know that His love is not just an ideal. It is a love that has become flesh and dwells amongst us. He has made His home in us that we might make ours in Him.

St. Paul tells us that we hold a treasure not made of gold, but of far greater worth. This Lent need not be our usual 'starting again' as if life is a game of 'Snakes and Ladders' in which we find ourselves annually starting again from an old beginning. Instead, we can know how Jesus has driven the snakes from the board, from the garden of Eden, and left only ladders. The best news is that He is the ladder, and all we must do is to climb onto His back to rise up with Him at Easter.

So, no long faces, no deep despairing breaths as we prepare ourselves for the usual 'two steps forward, three back' and the sense that we and this world are slowly slipping away from God. It is God who does the miracles; We have only to believe and persevere in our belief.

See Jesus setting about His work in your wilderness. And may your experience this Lent be more in keeping of the phrase used by Saint John Henry Newman of 'Heart speaking unto heart.'

With my blessing for you and those you pray for,

+Paul Swarbrick

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