

**A PASTORAL LETTER
FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER
for the First Sunday of Lent 21 February 2021**



APPOINTED TO BE READ AT ALL PUBLIC MASSES IN ALL CHURCHES AND CHAPELS IN THE DIOCESE OF LANCASTER ON THE WEEKEND OF 20/21 FEBRUARY 2021 (or shared in whatever way is possible, bearing in mind how few will be at Mass to hear it).

My dear people,

I send you my greetings as we begin the Holy Season of Lent, aware that we remain in some ways a scattered flock, still doing battle with the pandemic. Reflecting on Christ's forty days in the wilderness, it could be said we are engaged in battle with the pan-demonic. It is a time of temptation. I was sorely tempted to re-issue last year's Lenten Pastoral, partly to see how many notice, partly out of idleness and partly because I thought it was rather good . . . and there's another temptation; pride!

St Mark's account of our Blessed Lord's time in the wilderness is astoundingly brief. Perhaps a Lenten Pastoral should follow suit, stating the stark essentials we must follow to make Lent fruitful. According to tradition, this Letter will be read in all churches and chapels of the Diocese at every public Mass on the First Sunday of Lent. However, many parishes are not holding public worship, and those that are have greatly reduced congregations. Added to that, our Liturgies must be short, reducing the time we are socially gathered. Is the pandemic a cure for lengthy sermons? If so, may we live to see if the cure lasts.

So, our religious practice is reduced to stark essentials, just as our Lord found Himself without the freedom and comforts one grows used to when ordinary circumstances prevail. Where the Master is, there the willing disciple must be found too. It is a time of intense on-going formation for both the individual and for the Church. Three life-lines are given us; prayer, fasting and alms-giving.

Prayer. Christ promised to remain with us, and here we find Him an example of prayer. More than that, we are taken into His prayer through His conversation with the Father, His obedience to the Father's will and His union with the Father. This is more than asking God for favours or help with the things we can't manage. It is a desire for the Life of heaven. It is also an experience here on earth of the Life of heaven.

Fasting. Christ accepted less of this world's pleasures and ease even though on other occasions He would accept them and enjoy them. But here He deliberately puts them aside, knowing that they do not last. He acknowledges another order of delights, the delights that will last. Fasting is a discipline and an act of trust in the promise of a loving God. He knows our needs before we ask.

Almsgiving. Christ shows us that the fundamental motive for almsgiving is compassion for others. Later He instructed His disciples to '*Go out to the whole world*'. Material-giving remains an essential expression of obeying that command, showing solidarity with our neighbour. It saves us from living a selfish life. Sharing our time also gains us 'credit'. In this unfair world some are privileged and some are obviously disadvantaged. In these times more will be asked of some than of others. Needy causes are easy to find, overwhelmingly and exhaustingly easy. We do well to recall who it is telling us to persevere in charity even to the point of our own exhaustion and our own diminishing. He is the guarantee that we will not go short. His love will grow in us. '*Give, and gifts will be given to you.*'

And what of Mary's place in her Son's Lent? Did He speak with her before He left for the wilderness? Did she know where He was, what He was facing? Did He recall the blessing of a mother's worry? May Our Lady be with us in our prayer, fasting and almsgiving this Lent.

Much more could be said, but, following the example of St. Mark, this will do for now. May this Lenten message open doors of hope for you, bringing in the clean air of the wilderness, and with it, a reassuring experience of Christ's closeness. He has overcome all evil.

With my prayers for each of you, and my blessing,

With my blessing on you all,

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

+Paul Swarbrick
Bishop of Lancaster