

Pastoral Letter to be read at all Masses in the Archdiocese of Liverpool on the Second Sunday of Advent 9th/10th December 2017

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The season of Advent is very short this year – it is only three weeks and one day long– and this means that Christmas will be upon us before we know it. Inevitably our preparations for the great feast will gain a heightened sense of urgency as the days pass. This sense of urgency was also experienced in the time of John the Baptist.

Today's Gospel shows just how excited the people were at the news that John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness. Something great was about to happen. 'All of Judea and all of the people of Jerusalem' flocked to hear the preaching of John the Baptist who was announcing the coming of the Lord and calling them to repentance. The excitement amongst those who heard the Baptist must have been at a very high pitch, and that level of enthusiasm was also to be found later amongst the first Christians as we heard in today's second reading from St Peter's second letter. He exhorts us to always be ready for the coming of the Lord at the end of time, when his promises will be fulfilled and a new heaven and new earth will be ushered in. This will be the time when there will be a new reign of justice on the earth. Although we continue to state these truths in the Creed, have we lost the enthusiasm that should come with a belief that a new age will come to us?

In our time, Catholics and non-Catholics alike have welcomed Pope Francis because he is exciting and inclusive in his ministry. Like St Peter he impresses on us the necessity to fully live the Christian life now and not to put it off until later. By word and gesture Pope Francis encourages us to reach outwards to those who are in physical and spiritual need.

Throughout the archdiocese there are many examples of individuals, schools and parishes responding to the needs of others at home and in the developing world. As I go around the archdiocese the good works that are carried out in Christ's name never fail to lift my spirits and give me new heart. This orientation is at the heart of Christianity and therefore at the centre of our Christian Life. This is Pope Francis' vision for the Church. It is a vision of a church that is not hampered by buildings or regulations but one where these structures are put at the service of the gospel; and it is a vision that we should make our own.

In his letter, 'The Joy of the Gospel', Pope Francis wrote: I dream of a "missionary option", that is a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.

Our Diocesan Advent Prayer which you received last week and which will be used at all Masses says, 'Help us to become the Church you are calling us to be'.

Pope Francis invites everyone to be part of this adventure:

To those who feel far from God and the Church, to all those who are fearful or indifferent, I would like to say this: the Lord, with great respect and love, is also calling you to be a part of his people! The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.

Pope Francis' dream can become reality, but it requires us to change and to capture something of the enthusiasm that is found in our young people. They often ask the question, 'What would Jesus do'? And it is a good question. When we hear the gospels we see Jesus going to the poor, the sick, and the blind. But

he also spends time in prayer, attends the synagogue and keeps the Jewish feasts, even going up to Jerusalem though he knows it will mean suffering and death for him. So should it be with us. Prayer is important because when we truly engage with God it overflows as action. Our Advent Prayer asks that this may be our experience, 'Send us out to share what we have received ...' As we prepare for the coming of the Lord then a good way to do this is to take stock of our Christian life and ask ourselves if our spiritual life is centred only on ourselves or does it drive us outwards to bring the light of the gospel to others by feeding the hungry, working for peace, or contributing to charitable work. This process of prayer and reflection resulting in action is something that Pope Francis alluded to when he wrote to the church at the closing of the Year of Mercy:

The Year of Mercy has set us on the path of charity, which we are called to travel daily with fidelity and joy. It is the road of mercy, on which we meet so many of our brothers and sisters who reach out for someone to take their hand and become a companion on the way... By its very nature, mercy becomes visible and tangible in specific acts...

The road of mercy and the path of charity are other names for the journey that we follow as Pilgrim People. Our journey as an archdiocese over the next three years is a path that we will follow together towards the archdiocesan synod in 2020; after all the word 'synod' means just that – being together on a common road.

Sometimes it is difficult for me to capture the enthusiasm that I referred to earlier. The church has gone through much change and this has left us longing for a new vision. The beauty of the Advent season is that it reminds us that our future and the future of the Church are in God's hands and that he unfailingly comes to us in unexpected ways that are ever new. Who could have predicted that in our time we were to be blessed by having Francis as our pope, leading the church to deeper and more contemporary ways of living the gospel? As our eyes and hearts are opened to the coming of the Lord this Advent let us pray that we may see more clearly how we can serve him in the Archdiocese of Liverpool.

May I wish you and your families a blessed Advent and a peaceful Christmas.

Most Rev Malcolm McMahon OP, Archbishop of Liverpool