

**A PASTORAL LETTER
FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER
FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2019**



**Appointed to be read at all weekend Public Masses in the
Diocese of Lancaster, on the weekend of 30 November/1 December 2019**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The Holy season of Advent is once again before us. Another year has slipped by, with its memories, highlights and shadows. The Church is ever on watch, keeping awake, ready to greet the return of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Today's Prayer after Communion reminds us that we constantly live amidst passing things and we must hold fast to what endures. Whilst personal faith may often seem inadequate, the Faith of the Church, the Body of Christ, will carry us. Climate change, political and economic instability at national and international levels, scandals within the Church itself, and so much more can overwhelm us; we struggle to respond.

Those who keep watch can be threatened by many temptations. Tiredness, distractions, complacency, hurt, loneliness all chip away at the firmest resolve. Keeping watch in such circumstances is the work of committed adults working together, knowing that the personal attitude of each can help or hinder. We must choose to keep watch, doing all we can to be faithful to Christ's command.

Celebrations of Christmas often involve children. I am grateful to the faithfulness of schools in presenting the Christmas story and remaining true to what we have received. Children must be led; they need the example of adult faith, leading them to find and know and worship the adult Christ. Snowmen and elves must not take the place of Jesus. Snowmen melt. Elves do not exist. Belief must develop and grow and mature with Christ. It must leave the snug stable and set out towards Holy Week.

The Bishops of England and Wales have asked the Catholic community to use the coming year, starting today, as an opportunity to deepen our engagement with Jesus, the Word of God in Sacred Scripture. The theme is, 'The God Who Speaks'. Only last year we celebrated Adoremus, dedicated to knowing and reverencing Our Blessed Lord in the Most Holy Eucharist. The God Who Speaks has the same purpose. It will build us up as Christ's disciples and as the Church. It will make us stronger Catholics. The times we live in need us to take this year seriously, welcoming it with generous hearts.

Our Clergy have all studied Sacred Scripture and are ordained to preach the Word. Many teachers and lay Faithful are also well qualified to teach and catechise. Readers in parishes are chosen not just because they can read and have the courage to, but also because they prepare the readings in good time and work at the art of reading the Word

of God within the Sacred Liturgy. I acknowledge Religious communities in the Diocese who celebrate the Prayer of the Church, the Liturgy of the Hours, with fidelity. Many of the Laity share this practice, others use Lectio Divina, the reflective form of praying with the Word.

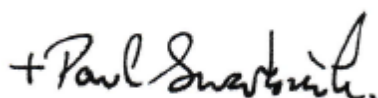
During this year I ask the Clergy to familiarise yourselves with the rubrics concerning the Church's use of Sacred Scripture, recognise the purpose of the rubrics, and do all you can to follow them. They exist for a good purpose. They help us to listen to the God Who Speaks. By listening to Christ the Teacher we will be more confident teachers.

Last year at this time I asked that each family, each Catholic household place a crib at the heart of the Christmas decorations. Make a crib an early gift to those who have slipped away from the practice of the Faith. This year can each Catholic household place the Word of God in a prominent place? It could be the Bible itself, or a personal Sunday Missal, or a copy of the Mass readings you may have accidentally stolen from the parish!

The Father was heard to declare; *'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him'*. Some fundamentalists once told me they did not go to funerals because in the Bible Our Lord told his disciples to *'leave the dead to bury the dead'*. They were utterly sincere, as fundamentalists often are. I asked them how they applied His command to cut off the hand or pluck out the eye that caused them to sin. They did not answer. Sincerity and enthusiasm are not enough for the willing disciple. We must learn how to listen to the adult Christ.

At Cana Mary told the wedding guests, *'Do whatever He tells you'*. We must learn how to listen to the adult Christ. May her prayers and example appeal to our hearts. She will be a sure and patient guide, teaching us what is of lasting worth in this passing world.

With my prayers and blessing upon each of you,

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

+Paul Swarbrick
Bishop of Lancaster