

**A PASTORAL LETTER  
FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER  
For the First Sunday of Advent 2021**



**APPOINTED TO BE READ AT ALL PUBLIC MASSES IN ALL CHURCHES AND CHAPELS IN THE DIOCESE OF LANCASTER ON THE WEEKEND OF November 27/28 2021 (or shared in whatever way is possible).**

My dear people,

Many worthy matters will be competing for your attention in these days, matters ranging from the personal to the global. I address you as my flock, and ask for your attention as we move into the shortest days of what has been for many another difficult year. On this first Sunday of Advent there are matters of Faith that claim a priority on our time not only so that we celebrate Christmas as we ought, but also if we are to be found ready when the Lord comes.

We are moving into the darkest time of the year, but Christ is our unfailing Light. We look back over the many events of 2021 and see that Christ has been our constant companion. We plan as best and as wisely as we can for the year ahead, knowing that Christ's plan is there for us. At times, our plans, even our best plans, must give way to His which is so much better. He will be our way, our guide and our loyal companion.

Today's Gospel shows us some disturbing scenes that we would all prefer to avoid, but it does not take much effort to realise that, for all its beauty and blessings, life will always have unwelcome surprises. Some people seem more fortunate than others, leading charmed lives, but the uncertainties ahead of us can so easily level things out! There is no room for complacency. However, there is plenty of room for greater trust in Him who will come with mercy to judge the living and the dead, and, please God, call us into that place He has prepared for us from the beginning of time. That is what God wants. That is where He longs for us to be. If it was not so, He would not have sent His Son into the world.

So, let us remind ourselves that Advent is above all a season of joyful hope. It is similar to, but different from, Lent, which carries a more penitential tone. No doubt you have seen how many around us have already put up their decorations and lights. No Advent for them! *'Let's get on with it!'* they seem to be saying. But, no; we wait. Before we can 'get on with it' we take time to consider what exactly it is we want to 'get on' with. That will let us know how best to prepare ourselves as well as our homes, schools and work-places.

The point I want to remind us of is that the God we worship has loved us so much that He sent His only Son to be born into this life to save us from sin. We are familiar with the stories of creation, and with the tragedy of our first parents being cast out of paradise because of their betrayal. But even there, God was merciful: When they were removed from the garden they were allowed to keep their souls, their longing for God and their hope of one day being welcomed back. Deep within each of us there is that memory of the garden; we know this life is not all there is.

The life of the disciple of Jesus must be different from the lives of those who do not know Him or choose to follow Him. If this is not the case, why did Our Lord spend so much time teaching? Why did He interrupt the routine of people's lives, calling them away from work and home to listen to Him? Why did He send them out into the world with His mission if it did not hold a treasure that would bring new hearts to all who welcomed it?

Of course, there is the temptation that we think that different makes us better than others. That way lies pride and arrogance. It will be for the Lord alone to decide who is welcomed home. We are to be different because we love one another as He has loved us. We are to strive to be holy because the Lord our God is Holy. A simple understanding of holiness is to be different because the Lord our God is different. We must strive to be different as He is.

Some practical matters. Make a crib the centre of your home. Get it ready over these coming weeks. What an excellent work it would be for our school children to make simple cribs to be given out to homes across our parishes, especially to the housebound. (They could be cut out and coloured, or constructed out of plasticine or whatever is to hand) Families could work with the younger members to make them at home, adding to them and improving them each year.

Make Holy Mass the heart of your Christmas celebration, and I would like to see more people choosing to go on Christmas day as well as Midnight. I fear that COVID has made us lazier Catholics in that it can be more convenient to 'go to Mass' online. For some this is a necessity; others may be using it as an excuse not to dare to return to our parishes. Perhaps it is becoming an easier option. Our Lord deserves better than that after all He has done for us.

I fear I may be speaking too late for some of you . . . . wait before you put up your decorations! And don't be in a hurry to take them down! Christmastide can be celebrated up to the Feast of Candlemas (2<sup>nd</sup> February). And if people ask why you still have your decorations or cards up it gives you a good opportunity to tell them.

Remember the poor. Find some way of reaching out to those far less fortunate – and there are plenty of them – who see themselves as lost causes.

Confession. Another fear I have is that this wonderful Sacrament is becoming even more neglected. Bother your priests to find some way of enabling individual celebrations of Confession. It is there for our good. As well as forgiveness remember that it brings healing. The simplest of prayers need to be rediscovered, especially the Rosary, and Mary's prayer, the Magnificat.

In so many ways you may appear out of step with those around you, offering a different way. That is good! Don't be put off. The world needs to see that difference. Saving the planet begins with the work of saving our souls. Unless that happens any progress will be short-lived.

If we are to be ready for Christmas we must prepare to refresh our Faith. Like Mary, we must prepare ourselves to let Christ be conceived in us, be formed in us. We must give Him a place to grow and to be born, to be welcomed and to be known and loved just as Mary did. He comes to take away the sins of the world, to share our life for a time so that we might share His for eternity.

With my blessing on all who hear or read this letter, and particularly those who are in the greatest need at this time,

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

Rt Rev Paul Swarbrick  
**Bishop of Lancaster**