

**A PASTORAL LETTER
FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER**



**APPOINTED TO BE READ AT ALL PUBLIC MASSES IN ALL CHURCHES AND CHAPELS IN
THE DIOCESE OF LANCASTER ON THE WEEKEND OF 21st/22nd FEBRUARY 2026**

Pastoral Letter First Sunday of Lent 2026

My dear people,

the simple invitation of Jesus to each of us is, ***‘Follow me’***. But we dither and pause and fall behind and lose our way. We have given in to temptation and lost heart and spoilt life not only for ourselves but for others too, and we have lost our Guide and don’t know what to do. Each Lent Jesus tells us to rise up and follow Him. He has not given up on us; nor should we give up on ourselves or on each other, no matter what catastrophes have befallen us. He enters the wilderness in search of Adam and Eve who were expelled from Eden when they sinned, but with hope that they might be found and forgiven and restored.

Jesus also sends His disciples out to search for the fallen. In two weeks’ time we will hear the Gospel telling us about the woman Jesus met at the well. I would like us to reflect on that woman today, in advance. She is sent to us by Christ and is a helpful companion for us on our Lenten. There may be much in her story that we share.

It is usual for the girls and women to walk together to the well, normally in the cool of early morning or in the evening after the heat. Some suggest that this woman is out of favour with the others. Perhaps she has a bad reputation, given the tragic life she has suffered, and finds it easier to avoid the company of others. But there is another way of understanding her. She wants the best water she can find for her family and for herself. After all that has happened and all the failures, deep within her heart she still has the desire for something good. She wants the best water. It makes me think of prisoners who still hope for a better life, or people whose lives have been devastated by war, daring to hope for something better. I think of those who have been abused but will not let the memories rob them of a better future.

Let us picture the group of girls going for water at dawn. Chatting, laughing, gossiping, enjoying one another’s company. The chatter continues as buckets are thrown down the well, one after the other. They hit the sides of the well going down, knocking earth into the water. Hitting the water, the buckets stir up the sediment. Pulled up, one after the other, they knock against the sides of the well, and the water level drops because so many buckets have to be filled. A price is paid for following the crowd – dirty water.

Now let us notice this woman, approaching the well alone at the hottest time of the day. The dirt has had hours to settle. The aquifers have fed fresh water into the well, and the water level has risen. With care she can draw up the best water the well can offer. The loneliness and the heat are worth the trouble. This woman can be a model of encouragement for us. The efforts we see her make encourage each of us to search for the best life, the Life Jesus offers us. Our religious practice will often mean we live differently from those around us, but see the reward!

Let us turn now to the classic exercises of Lent, given to us by Christ Himself; these are **Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving**. I note how Jesus speaks to His disciples assuming they do these things. He says, ***‘When you pray, when you fast, when you give alms. . .’*** The first question I must

ask myself is - If I wish to be counted as a disciple of Christ, **do** I pray, **do** I fast, **do I** give alms? Jesus Himself waits for my honest answer, not waiting to condemn me but telling me to choose these exercises if I want to be His disciple.

So, why do they matter? **Prayer** acknowledges that God is the source of all that is good. God is the life and love we long for and He offers us eternal life. Prayer engages the spirit, reminding us that we are spiritual beings, made in God's image and likeness. **Fasting** acknowledges that we are also flesh, we have bodies and bodily appetites. Created by God, we must somehow find ways of showing who we belong to, body and soul, where we come from, and where our ultimate loyalty lies. Fasting also enables us to admit that we have done wrong and must do penance as an expression of our guilt, shame and sorrow for the hurt and damage caused. **Almsgiving** acknowledges that my life – even my spiritual life – is not just a private affair. I am part of a body of people, and part of the Body of Christ. I must have a concern for the well-being of others, both spiritually and materially. Almsgiving makes this real, and as well as being a matter of justice it is a clear expression of generosity inspired by my awareness of the Father's generosity. Almsgiving prevents my prayer and fasting becoming selfish.

Practically I encourage us all to renew or refresh our prayer life, especially parents with young children. Establish habits of simple prayer. I commend the **School of Prayer** promoted through the parishes this Lent. May it give you more confidence in your prayer lives. Many of you may have your own favourite charities, but I encourage you to support the work of **CAFOD, Aid to the Church in Need** and **MISSIO** (the Pontifical Mission Societies). (I do understand many have limited budgets. You aren't expected to give to everything!) I also encourage you to make a strong effort to pray the **Stations of the Cross** this Lent either at home or in your parishes. See what Christ has done for us and what He wants for us. I also ask you to pray for the many people who are preparing to be Baptized and received into Full Communion this coming Easter. Have a serious but joyful Lent!

With my blessing,

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

+Rt Rev Paul Swarbrick
Bishop of Lancaster