

PASTORAL LETTER
OF THE
MOST REVEREND BERNARD LONGLEY
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM
FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
16/17 DECEMBER 2017



John...came as a witness, as a witness to speak for the light.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we enter the last few days of Advent we are accompanied by the figure of St John the Baptist. Last Sunday we heard his message in St Mark's Gospel - *prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight*. Now in St John's Gospel we see a reflection of the light of Christ in the Baptist's ministry. This light first dawned upon the world at the Incarnation and we celebrate its coming at Christmas with the birth of our Saviour.

On this joyful Gaudete Sunday we light the third candle on the Advent wreath. This signifies our growing expectation and also our joyful longing for the coming of the Lord as the light of the world. In the words of Simeon, when he recognises the infant Jesus as the Messiah, he is *a light to enlighten the Gentiles and the glory of your people, Israel*. In a world overshadowed by sin and suffering we need to listen to John the Baptist's message - to be ready for God's light to shine upon us and upon the world today.

This Thursday is the shortest and the darkest day of the year. On the twenty-first of December, at Evening Prayer, the Church calls upon our Lord in these words: *O Oriens – O Rising Sun, you are the splendour of eternal light and the sun of justice: O come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death*. In this final week before Christmas we might ask: what does the dawning light of Christ enable us to see more clearly in our own lives and in the world around us?

The Advent antiphon gives us a clue where it addresses Our Lord as *the sun of justice*. The Prophet Isaiah spells it out for us when he describes the work of the Messiah. He has been sent *to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken; to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison*. Christ, the light of the world, fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah through his ministry of healing and forgiving, giving us all a glimpse and a foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

The signs of God's Kingdom are also present in the life of the Church as she seeks to be faithful to the mission received from Our Lord - *proclaiming a year of favour from the Lord*. Like St John the Baptist the Church is also called to be *a witness to speak for the light*. As members of the Body of Christ, each one of us has an important part to play in building up the Kingdom of God.

We view the world in a new way through the light of Christ and we learn to have a deeper appreciation for the gift of creation. Two years ago Pope Francis emphasised this in his Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* when he said: *What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?* The Holy Father urges us never to forget the intimate relationship between the fragility of the planet and the plight of the poor, echoing the compassion of the Messiah: *He has sent me to bring good news to the poor.* They are the ones who suffer most from the way our earth has been mistreated and exploited.

Pope Francis also says that we need to listen both to the cries of creation and to the cries of the poor. When we do so we undergo what he calls an *ecological conversion*. The Holy Father encourages us to live more simply, more sustainably and more in solidarity with the poor. He invites us to make our choices *based on a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters – including future generations.*

Pope Francis has made it clear that he sees care for all creation as a work of mercy. He says: *As a spiritual work of mercy, care for our common home calls for a grateful contemplation of God's world, which allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us. As a corporal work of mercy, care for our common home requires simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness and makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world.*

In *Laudato Si'* we have an authoritative and comprehensive presentation of the Catholic Church's social teaching. During Advent we can try to appreciate its particular focus on the environment, the world that Christ came to redeem. The Holy Father has shown us that peace, justice and the preservation of creation are intimately interconnected. We also hear this in the words of the Prophet Isaiah as he looks forward to the coming of the Messiah: *For as the earth makes fresh things grow, as a garden makes seed spring up, so will the Lord make both integrity and praise spring up in the sight of the nations.*

I would ask you, if you have not already done so, to look carefully at Pope Francis' encyclical. Perhaps it could be the basis for a study group in your parish during next Lent. Encouraged by *Laudato Si'* you may wish to consider becoming a LiveSimply parish next year, using the scheme prepared by CAFOD. In these and other ways we can respond to the encouragement of St Paul in today's Second Reading: *Be happy at all times; pray constantly; for all things give thanks to God.*

May the Son of God fill you with joy this Advent as you prepare to celebrate his birth. *May you all be kept safe and blameless, spirit, soul and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

With my prayers and every blessing for a holy and joyful Christmas to come.

Yours devotedly in Christ

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

✠Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham

Given at Birmingham on the 13 December 2017 and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Archdiocese on the Third Sunday of Advent, 16/17 December 2017.