

Pastoral Letter for the First Sunday of Advent

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Today, the first Sunday of Advent, is the beginning of the new liturgical year. Throughout this coming year we will be reflecting on who Jesus is in the eyes of St Mark and the community for whom Mark wrote his Gospel – his Good News.

Advent is a time of waiting and expectation, a time of being awake and alert. At the beginning of this season we are reminded that we are made for eternal life. Death is not the end of life but a gateway to the fullness of life. We are made not for annihilation but to be fully alive with God our Father by the power of the Holy Spirit and through Christ our Lord. The first two Sundays of Advent remind us of this truth.

At the beginning of Mark's Gospel Jesus proclaims that the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel. The Gospel is Jesus. We are called to believe in him. However, we know it is not always easy to believe. There are times when our faith is challenged and we find it difficult to believe. These are often the dark times of our life. It is no accident that the Master of the House returns at night-time – at an hour he is not expected. He comes to take away the darkness of our lives and leads us into the light.

The events of life often challenge us. There are times of darkness when we feel life is heavy and burdensome, when things are stacked against us. The darkness may be due to a breakdown in relationships which were once joyful and life giving. It may be the fear of redundancy and the consequences that follow from this. We may fear being marginalised by others because of our ethnic roots or our sexual orientation. It may be an illness that seems to be taking away the quality of our life or the life of someone who we love. It may be the fear of Covid-19, or it may be the fear of migrants who have fled from their homeland in search of somewhere safe to live.

Jesus comes as light of the world, taking away the fear, enabling us to be at peace, though we still have to face the reality of life. Jesus comes as our Redeemer: he comes in the name of the Lord to take away whatever is destructive within our lives and lead us through the darkness and fear to be a people of hope. Our hope is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Advent looks towards the birth of our Redeemer. Some people are saying that this Christmas will be like no other. Every Christmas is different because life is continually changing. At the heart of Christmas is the truth that the Word of God became human and lived among us. Christmas celebrates the love of God for the whole of creation. Advent is a time when we prepare a way for the Lord; to have a conversation with him, a dialogue with Jesus who is the image of the invisible of God.

The invitation to prepare a way for the Lord is not just to us as individuals but to the whole Church, to our Diocese, to our Parishes, to our Schools and to our family life. All of us together are called to encounter God in our everyday lives and to share the Mission of Christ. We need to be a listening people, a Church that knows the joys and sorrows of all humanity and brings to our world reasons for hoping and living. If our communities are outward-looking we will live, if inward-looking, we will diminish.

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During this time of Covid-19 with restrictions put on the celebration of the liturgy, the family as the Domestic Church can be more focused. In our families we can pray together; talk to one another about our faith and what we believe; talk of the challenges we face; encourage one another and learn to forgive one another. We can live our lives as Pope Francis says 'marked by the flavour of the Gospel'. At home, light your own Advent Candles and while you do so listen to the Gospel of the Advent Sunday and share your thoughts about it.

As we light our Advent Candles, we open ourselves to the presence of God who broadens our horizons to allow the light to shine in our darkness. He is the light that no one was expecting so stay awake and be alert for the coming of our God.

With my best wishes and prayers

Rt Rev Declan Lang

Bishop of Clifton