Pastoral Letter
First Sunday of Advent
29 November 2020
On Mission

Dear friends in Christ,

'Christmas is cancelled!' This abrupt headline appeared during September, causing consternation throughout the land. It became clearer, journalists were referring to the cultural trappings of a festive season. But there was also the lingering prospect that we may not be able to meet up with all our loved ones because of the virus. In truth of course Christmas cannot be cancelled. It is a historical event, one which has a wonderful implication for ourselves as we journey through these difficult days with hope. In the words of St Paul, 'when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.'[1] Three centuries after the apostle wrote those words, St Athanasius reflected upon what it means that God sent his Son, born of a woman. This great theologian of Christmas lived in a time when some denied the truth of the Incarnation, that Jesus is consubstantial with the Father. And so he tells us why Jesus, 'the incorporeal and incorruptible Word of God entered our world.'[2] Our human minds 'had fallen finally to the level of sensible things'.[3]

On this First Sunday of Advent, Jesus invites us to raise our minds beyond the senses in order to ponder the mysteries of faith. God's unfolding plan of salvation will reach a climax at the end of history. We should await this day with active faith, and not in some distracted and indifferent manner. Rather, Jesus tells us in today's Gospel, 'Be on your guard, stay awake, because you never know when the time will come.' Maybe these words sound threatening to us? It does not have to be so. Like excited children waiting for Christmas to come, our Advent faith encourages us to await Jesus' second coming with longing and persevering hope.

---

[1] Gal 4.4-5

[2] St Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 2.8

[3] *Ibid* 3.16

And there is more. Jesus tells us today that he has 'left his servants in charge, each with his own task'. Pope Francis explains this task clearly, 'In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptised, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelisation… The new evangelisation calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptised.'[4] There may be many reasons why we feel inadequate for this missionary task. We may have become indifferent and have fallen asleep. Perhaps our confidence has been robbed by scandal and institutional failure on the part of the Church. We feel ashamed by our weakness and lack of gifts. Despite all these things, Pope Francis makes it clear we are all in this together. We may have the idea this is for others. And even if we want to be missionary disciples, perhaps we are unclear about what this looks like in our lives.

St Therese of Lisieux, Patroness of the Missions, said, 'I will desire in heaven the same thing as on earth: to love Jesus and to make him loved.'[5] Does this not encapsulate the essence of mission? First of all, a real *desire* that others find Jesus to be the Way, the Truth and the Life in their own lives.[6] And secondly, a recognition that mission is about bringing others into a personal and loving relationship with the Lord. We might develop business plans, pastoral plans, have all sorts of strategies and projects, but if we do not know that Jesus loves us unconditionally and we are invited to love Him in return, then we are missing the mark by a long way!

We learn from our experience. After some initial disorientation at the beginning of the pandemic, it is as though we Catholics have found our feet again during the lockdowns. We are reaching out to those in need in so many largely unobserved ways. Parish communities are using virtual platforms and social media to share a rich feast of liturgical, spiritual and catechetical experiences. There is social outreach to the elderly and to families, food banks and errand services. A number have risen to the challenge of church stewardship, enabling our churches to be open for prayer. I sense in all this, we seek to encounter the face of Christ ourselves, and living out our inheritance as adopted children of God in baptism. We are using our imagination to reach out to others. We are being missionaries.

And as we begin a new year in the Church, there will be even more need for creative ways to become more effective missionaries. Please do not be disturbed by the challenges we face at this time. Jesus is Emmanuel, God amongst us. And Jesus chose to be God amongst us in the form of a helpless babe in Bethlehem. We too may feel helpless at times, especially in these days we live through, but these feelings should not overwhelm us. The

---

[4] Evangelli Gaudium 120

[5] Letter to her missionary brothers

[6] Cf Jn 14.6

mystery of Christmas invites us to be enfolded in the love made present to us, especially when we become poor in spirit.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

Bishop of Northampton

Given at Northampton on the Feast of Christ the King
and appointed to be read or distributed in all churches and chapels of the Diocese on the First Sunday of Advent, 28th and 29th November, 2020