



DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

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Pastoral Letter
Fifth Sunday of Lent
3rd April 2022

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

As Easter approaches, we have many things to consider. Uppermost in our minds are probably the two global events which have changed our lives and that of many others: the coronavirus pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We feel that there is little we can do to change the situation in either case. And yet our faith in the Risen Christ gives us hope for the future. In a short time, we will relive through the liturgy the suffering, death and resurrection of the Lord. This not only gives us hope but also a new energy and vision to face the future. We are an 'Easter people', a people of joy and optimism. We are ready to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to share with others the peace and joy that only the Risen Christ can give. Even in the face of pandemic and war we know that sin and its consequences have been defeated for ever through the Easter mystery.

We have seen how, even in the midst of war and great suffering, the strong faith of the people of Ukraine sustains them and gives them hope to face the future. If we are to be true followers of the Lord, we too need to place our hope in him. The clearest expression of that hope is our regular attendance at Mass. We need the Mass to feed us through Word and Sacrament which deepens our faith and supports us in times of need. Since the pandemic, many have been nervous to return or have fallen out of the habit in these strange times. So I now ask you to encourage those who have not yet returned to join us once more in the worshipping communities of our diocese. While the circulation of the coronavirus continues in society, the clear message of the health authorities is that following the successful roll-out of the vaccination programme, the usual patterns of life should now return. This is true also for the life of the Church in England and Wales in all its activities and in our own diocese too.

The gospel passage today reminds us that another way in which we place our hope in the Lord is by our regular use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Again, the various lockdowns during the time of the pandemic meant that many people felt unable to use this wonderful sacrament, when we personally encounter the mercy of God. I would like to encourage you during the remainder of Lent and in the Easter season, to confess your sins to a priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation as this is the primary means by which we receive the healing love and merciful forgiveness of God.

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Pope Francis has said that:

'The centre of confession is not the sins we declare, but the divine love we receive, of which we are always in need ... Jesus, who waits for us, listens to us and forgives us, is the centre of Confession.'

We know from our human experience that moments of confession and forgiveness need to be in person. Of course, we can send presents or messages to the one we have offended. Sooner or later, however, we must look them in the eye, admit what we have done and say, "I am sorry", then hopefully we receive their forgiveness. The other will expect us to promise not to repeat the offence again; there is no other way than this, challenging as it may be.

So it is with Christ. Our meeting with him needs to be personal and include those steps: confession, contrition, the reception of forgiveness and absolution, and a firm purpose of amendment with a penance which is a small act of love on our part. This sacrament is a great gift; an awesome opportunity to know and receive the Lord's forgiveness. Moreover, we are healed and given strength to overcome our sins in the future. In Confession we are absolutely assured that when the priest says the words of Christ's forgiveness over us that our sins are blotted out. Like the woman in today's Gospel, we are forgiven, not condemned, and sent out in the joy of knowing that we are reconciled to God and our neighbour.

You will find lots of resources on our Diocesan website about prayer and how to make a good confession.

Finally, as many are aware, on the feast of the Annunciation last week, in union with the Holy Father and many bishops throughout the world I dedicated Ukraine and Russia to Our Lady. Pope Francis described it as

"a gesture of the universal Church, which in this dramatic moment lifts up to God, through his mother and ours, the cry of pain of all those who suffer and implore an end to the violence, and to entrust the future of our human family to the Queen of Peace."

I want to take this opportunity to thank you for the way in which so many have prayed for peace in Ukraine and generously given practical support to the victims of war. Despite the difficulties of these challenging times, we can still look to the future with confidence and at the same time take stock of where we are now placing ourselves and our war-torn Continent in the hands of God.

Yours devotedly



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