



**APPOINTED TO BE READ AT ALL PUBLIC MASSES IN ALL CHURCHES AND CHAPELS
IN THE DIOCESE OF LANCASTER ON THE WEEKEND OF 20th APRIL 2024**

Pastoral Letter for the Fourth Sunday of Eastertide, Good Shepherd Sunday.

21st April 2024

My dear people,

Following the tradition established by my predecessors, I write this Pastoral Letter to you on the theme of Christ, the Good Shepherd, model for the pastoral ministry of priests. Genesis tells us that each of us is made in the image and likeness of God. Jesus tells us that each of us must try our best to live lives after the example He has given us. Remember, Jesus would never ask us to do something He knows we are incapable of. In fact, He continually puts within our reach and ability what we are tempted to give up on ever achieving: Holiness of life, forgiveness, peace, healing and reconciliation, life without grief and sadness, life restored. All these are possible through and with Jesus who has risen from the grave.

It crossed my mind that Jesus may have chosen the image of the Good Shepherd because He knew well His disciples' habit of 'woolly thinking', meaning a way of thinking that doesn't amount to much and doesn't give what is needed. Or maybe it is our 'woolly prayers', so often lacking heart, focus and conviction. Contrast all this with the bold, clear statements we find in today's Gospel,

'I know my own and my own know me',

'I know the Father',

'The Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep',

'I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me'.

Here is a boldness and firmness of intent that lifts the heart of the listener and inspires confidence. It is with the same firmness of intent that Our Lord chose men to serve as priests in the Church, not as any kind of super-privileged class, but as a means of guaranteeing that the Church would truly be the Mystical Body of Christ, able to live the life of Christ throughout time. He wanted it this way.

Let us pray for those clergy who have died recently, and I call to mind Father John Heaney and Father Tom Forster. I give thanks for the faithfulness of those who celebrate significant anniversaries this year, remembering especially Mgr Frank Slattery, celebrating his seventieth jubilee, a remarkable achievement. I pray for Deacon Simon Marley, due to be ordained priest for the Diocese in the autumn, and please pray for Stephen Bamber and Christopher Sumner, in formation for the priesthood in Rome.

I am grateful for all the priests serving in the Diocese (and some beyond our boundaries), with deep gratitude for those who have come to us from far afield. At the same time, I ask for prayers

for vocations from amongst our local men. As we see our numbers decline it does not seem right that we constantly draw in clergy from abroad, where they are needed even more than here. But it seems to me that I have no right to ask for more priestly vocations if I am not looking after those priests I already have.

Undoubtedly, as the years carry us forward, we will continue to see our parishes change, and the number of Masses will reduce, at least for the time-being. We may have to travel a little further for Mass or wait a little longer for Mass to be available in our local church. May we resist living our faith out of what is convenient for us. Hardships and inconveniences invite us to make personal acts of love as gestures of gratitude and confidence in our loving Shepherd.

'I know my own, and my own know me.' These words can bring us comfort and reassurance even in what can rightly be called a global trauma. Jesus rose and retained the scars of the crucifixion. If together we are the Body of Christ, it is the vocation of some to be the wounds of Christ, and we can see that blood is still weeping from those wounds even though the Lord is risen indeed. The Good Shepherd knows this and will tend those wounds with outstanding love and gentleness. We have His word. The art of the pastoral ministry is to tend those wounds with the care and gentleness of Christ. May the Lord ensure that we always have priests able to serve in this way. May our Catholic schools create a culture within which our young people will hear God's call and choose to follow Him as priests, deacons, religious and consecrated single people, as well as in holy matrimony.

With my blessing for you and your families,

+Paul Swarbrick

Bishop of Lancaster