

**A PASTORAL LETTER
FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER
FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT**



**Appointed to be read at all weekend Public Masses in the Diocese of Lancaster
on the weekend of 9/10 March 2019**

Lent Pastoral Letter March 2019

My Dear People,

We need the holy season of Lent, both personally and for the Church. It is a gift given to us by Jesus Himself. It will be our way to Easter. It will be where we find mercy and healing and hope. We need the discipline of the desert if we are to become the disciples of Jesus. It is not optional. We know that some wounds do not heal themselves. If a wound is to be made better it must be taken to the doctor, and uncovered and cleaned.

We are told that Jesus was led by the Spirit through the wilderness. What was His purpose in entering such an inhospitable place, and why did He stay so long? To answer that question and understand we must go back to the beginning, to the story of Creation. We know it well, we were there.

We are told that the Lord God fashioned man out of the dust of the earth, and breathed life into him, giving the first ever 'kiss of Life'. The Lord God created a beautiful garden for Adam and Eve, and His habit was to walk there with them in the cool of the evening. Each evening of the days of creation God looked at what He had made and said it was good. Somewhere deep within the soul of each of us lies the memory of that garden and those walks, and those words.

We are told that the fall from grace came quickly. We were expelled from the garden. Life would now be lived in a hard land. The story continues with the call of Abraham, setting out with his people to search for a land flowing with milk and honey. Those people became slaves in Egypt. They stayed there for a long time but never forgot that it wasn't their true home. Miraculously, they found themselves free, standing on the shore of the Red Sea, looking to the west across the water at the land from which they had escaped. They turned to the east and saw before them the great wilderness through which they must go to find their homeland. That is where we stand at the moment we are baptised, free but still faced with a long journey home.

Centuries later, the people of Israel once again lost their place. They were taken into exile, to Babylon. And yet, those deep memories never left them, feeding their dreams and their hope that one day they would again be found. One day God will return and take us home

The coming of Jesus - Son of God, son of Mary - into the world, reassures us that the Father has not forgotten His children, or given up on them. Beautiful though this world can be it is not home and does not give us lasting satisfaction. We only have to think of how many people believe their happiest days are behind them. Perhaps you are one of them. How easily so much good work is lost.

We are told that Jesus enters the wilderness to do battle with the devil. He is fighting for us. Where is this battle-ground? We are not talking of the African Sahara or the Empty Quarter of Arabia or some other vast geographical desert. The wilderness Jesus enters is very near to

us, even within us. It is the wilderness of the human heart. We do not live in the desert. Water pours easily from our taps and showers; our shops are full of nice things; our homes are full of comforts; we sleep on soft beds. The wilderness Jesus is entering is your heart. He reminds us of that first 'kiss of life'. He tells us we do not need to live on memories or believe our best days are over, no matter how badly things have gone. To the devil He brings battle; to us He brings mercy and healing and nourishment for the journey we must make.

Ironically, we can learn most about love through experiences of love lost or love gone wrong or love wasted. It is a lesson of the heart. Once we begin to learn this lesson we can find joy. The value of life is known when it is most at risk.

When I was abroad, I worked with a young African Sister in the parish. One year, as Lent was approaching, I asked her what she was doing for Lent. Her answer shocked me. 'Father, this Lent I have decided to do less!' It was not what I had expected, and it took me a while to understand, but then I realised she had a good point. I am very grateful to her to this day. We are all so busy. There is so much to do. Our 'labour-saving' devices have us running round like headless chickens! But God built into creation a regular day of rest. We have lost it – or been robbed of it. We need it back because it enables us to see what really matters . . . and what doesn't.

Jesus left the busy world behind and entered the emptiness of the wilderness, to do battle and to find us and rescue us and lead us home. Many of us may be unable to make the time to pray and worship as we know we should. I know all too well the pressures of modern life. Yes, we can fast and deny ourselves some comfort. Everyone is dieting or cutting down on drink or training for something. Yes, we can make more contributions to the poor. So many are giving to the endless appeals and good causes that surround us every day. But finding time for serious prayer so easily defeats us. Even so, I strongly encourage you to make even a small effort this Lent to take time to pray. It need not be for long. Sadly, our churches are often very noisy places. But when everyone has gone and you are quiet and alone with Our Lord, present in the Blessed Sacrament, you can enter the wilderness of your heart and find Jesus. He is already there, fighting for you and waiting for you.

I appeal to my parish clergy to arrange for our churches to be open for you during the day so that you can find time to pray, even if it's only five minutes. Perhaps at least at weekends, or a specific weekday evening (publicised) to cater for those who work.

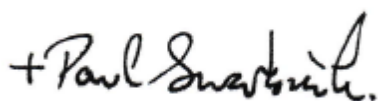
I appeal to parishioners to overcome all that would discourage you, especially when you meet opposition or even ridicule. Plenty of people will tell you it's not worth it. I tell you it is! Take the little children to church outside Mass times. Introduce them to the treasure of silent prayer. Show them how to be quiet! Let them watch you pray.

The Prophet Hosea wrote these beautiful words, 'I am going to lure her, and lead her out into the wilderness, and speak to her heart.' It is the Lord speaking of His love for us.

This Lent do a little less: let Jesus achieve a little more.

With my blessing to each of you.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Paul Swarbrick". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

+Paul Swarbrick
Bishop of Lancaster