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**Pastoral Letter to be read  
on the First Sunday of Advent 2015  
Sunday, 29<sup>th</sup> November 2015**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Sunday when we celebrated the Feast of Christ the King, we heard the Prophet Daniel writing at a time when the people of Israel were threatened with extinction by foreign powers. Daniel's message to the Israelites was one of profound hope: "I saw, coming on the clouds of heaven, one like a son of man. His sovereignty is an eternal sovereignty which shall never pass away, nor will his empire pass away." It was a message of hope and assurance to an embattled people that the power of sin and evil would never prevail over the power and presence of their God.

Advent is the season that is designed to remind us of that promise, and to awaken in us that same spirit of hope and longing as we prepare to celebrate the Incarnation at Christmas. St. John, in the prologue to his gospel, tells us that in the person of Christ, "All that came to be had life in him and that life was the light of men, a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower." We need to remind ourselves of that truth today as we begin Advent in the dark shadow of the terrible slaughter of so many innocent people in Paris just three weeks ago. I'm sure you, like me, have watched some of the endless replays on television with first-hand accounts of people re-living the initial shock and horror of that mindless violence; the fear, bewilderment and sadness of that day; and then the recrimination and anger; the clamour for justice and retribution, leading to demands for a "war on terrorism". Those horrific events were yet another, terrifying example of the sinfulness, injustice and evil which still abounds in the world and in the hearts of individuals and groups, and sometimes in the very structures of society. It was a particularly terrifying example of what Saint John Paul II called the "*mysterium iniquitatis*" - the mystery of evil.

In the face of this tragedy, many will ask, "Where is our God in all this? Has he abandoned us?" For people of faith, the answer must be a resounding no! As disciples of Christ we believe that through the Paschal Mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection, the world has been redeemed. The frightening events in Paris, in the Middle East and parts of Africa, remind us that the world is still in need of redemption from sin and evil. The work of redemption is literally a labour of love and mercy, which God pursues through, with and in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. But the working out of that redemption has to take place in every age and will continue to be worked out until the second coming of Christ at the end of time. If we are to take part in that process of redemption, we need to let God form and shape us, we need to wake up spiritually, to hear again and heed the words of Jesus Christ addressed to each one of us in today's Gospel: "Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man."

The God we believe in is the God who is “slow to anger and rich in mercy”. In his infinite love and mercy, God calls each one of us to a conversion of heart, so that his love and mercy is witnessed to in the world by the way we live our lives. Our God constantly seeks entry into the sanctuary of our hearts, so that we can receive his redeeming grace and be visible witnesses in our communities to his unconditional love, compassion and mercy. Each day he stands and knocks at the door of our hearts, the door that can only be opened from the inside. He longs for us to let him in, but he will never force it open. Advent is a special time for us to co-operate with God’s work and to open our hearts to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. It is a time for us to make use of all the means which Christ has given us to bring about our conversion of heart - especially the gift of Holy Scripture, the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation and the gift of personal prayer.

And to support every member of the universal Church in this endeavour, Pope Francis has proclaimed an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, which will begin on the 8<sup>th</sup> December this year. He sets this Holy Year in the context of a renewed effort for all of us to participate in the new evangelisation, especially by the witness of our lives. *“The Church,”* he says, *“is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person. The Spouse of Christ (the Church), must pattern her behaviour after the Son of God who went out to everyone without exception. In the present day, as the Church is charged with the task of the new evangelisation, the theme of mercy needs to be proposed again and again with new enthusiasm and renewed pastoral action. It is absolutely essential for the Church, and for the credibility of her message, that she herself lives and testifies to mercy.”* He went on to say that, *“It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It will be a way to awaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God’s mercy.”*

This Advent and the coming Year of Mercy are a God-given opportunity for us to deepen and strengthen our faith and trust in him, every day making our own the prayer of the Psalmist in Psalm 50: “A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me.” My dear brothers and sisters, never forget the words of Jesus: “Courage! Do not be afraid, for I am with you until the end of time.” Let us pray that the presence and light of Christ will shine in our hearts and minds every day, trusting fully in the mercy of God, and that we will not be overcome by the present darkness that overshadows our world.

With an assurance of my prayers for you all,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read '+ Peter', with a stylized flourish above the name.

Archbishop of Southwark

Given at Southwark 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2015, Feast of Christ the King.