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**Pastoral Letter to be read  
on the Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time 2017  
Sunday, 26<sup>th</sup> February 2017**

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In today's first reading we hear the cry of the people of Israel who felt that God had forgotten them and abandoned them. But the prophet Isaiah reassures them that that isn't the case. He assures the people that even if a mother forgot her baby at the breast, God would never abandon his people. It is a very rare female image of God as a compassionate mother, the tender, caring mother who could never forget her children, and Isaiah speaks God's words of consolation for his people, "Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you." And in the gospel, Jesus speaks similar words of comfort when he tells us not to worry. He uses the word five times in this short gospel to teach us that if we become preoccupied with our worries, even in our personal prayer and during Mass, our hearts and minds become deaf to his word spoken deep in our hearts.

When he says, "Don't worry about tomorrow", he's not saying that we shouldn't plan for tomorrow. What he is condemning is all the worrying and fretting that keeps us from lifting up our hearts beyond material values and the cares of this world. This week, on Ash Wednesday, we begin the season of Lent. "The Lenten season offers us once again an opportunity to reflect upon the very heart of Christian life: charity. This is a favourable time to renew our journey of faith, both as individuals and as a community, with the help of the word of God and the sacraments. This journey is one marked by prayer and sharing, silence and fasting, in anticipation of the joy of Easter."

This special time is given to us by the Church to help us in preparing to celebrate the Paschal Mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ - the great feast of Easter - in just over six weeks' time. During this time the Church exhorts us to get to know God better, and to get to know ourselves better too! It is a time for turning our hearts more fervently to him who, in the words of the Psalmist, is "compassion and love, slow to anger and rich in mercy." He is the one who "does not treat us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our faults", but, rather, the one "who crowns you with love and compassion." And he dearly wants us to reveal his love and compassion to the world in which we live. He wants us to "incarnate", to embody, that love and compassion in our relationships with one another and to express it in a practical way, particularly to those who are in any kind of need. He commands us to use generously the gifts and talents we have received from the Holy Spirit for the building up of the community of his Church; to help build that communion of love, compassion and mercy, which reflects the very life of the Trinity.

Lent is a season of prayer, fasting and practical concern for those in need. It offers all of us an opportunity to prepare for Easter by a serious discernment about our lives, with particular attention to the word of God which enlightens the daily journey of all who believe. So our particular focus in Lent must be first of all on God, not ourselves. Secondly it must be on our neighbour who is in need, because in that neighbour we are called to look with compassion on the face of the suffering Christ and do what we can to alleviate his suffering.

We can only do as the Lord asks of us, if our hearts are united with his heart; we must come to know him, and abide with him ever more deeply and with ever greater commitment, day by day. Lent is a “favourable time” for us to ask ourselves some pertinent questions about where we stand with God, and how we are responding to the commission he has given us. We can’t do that fruitfully unless we become more attentive to the word of God in the scriptures and through spending some time each day in quiet prayer. We can’t, from our own resources, produce the fruit that will last, unless we allow the living word of God to nurture our faith and trust in God who loves each one of us unconditionally and with a steadfast love, and who looks on us in our weakness with great mercy and compassion. So this Lent, I pray that God will open our hearts and rekindle within them the fire of his love!

With an assurance of my prayers and blessing 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, 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2017.