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**Pastoral Letter to be read
on the Sixth Sunday of Ordinary time 2018
Sunday before Ash Wednesday
Sunday, 11th February 2018**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Next Wednesday is Ash Wednesday when we begin the Season of Lent, and the readings at Mass will speak to us of the need for prayer, of fasting, and almsgiving. We might be forgiven for feeling a little dispirited and despondent at the prospect: first a day of fasting and abstinence, and then six weeks of penance to come!

With that thought in mind I am looking out at the sleet and rain drifting down in the bitter north-easterly wind, and I'm sure that you, like me, long for the first signs of Spring. We are still in the grip of a rather bitter winter, and there remains an undeniable atmosphere of gloom in the world outside my study window – a gloom reflected not only in the weather but in the daily news bulletins which seem to be filled with “bad news” of wars and civil disturbance, drought and poverty in Africa and other parts of the world, the constant threat of terrorism, the upsurge in refugees fleeing their war-stricken homelands and the flourishing of human trafficking – the list could go on and on!

Sometimes the darkness and gloom of winter is not simply something outside us, but seems to have invaded our very hearts and chills the very depths of our being. We can go through periods when our faith seems to suffer such a “winter”, a winter which seems so prolonged as to appear endless. In especially dark times we may even feel that we have lost our faith altogether. We can become anxious and fearful; beginning to think that we are being tested beyond our strength and endurance, or even that God has finally given up on us and abandoned us. Then we weep and mourn for the lost times when our faith was strong giving us the power to bear the stormy blasts which assailed us in times past and which came so unexpectedly and for no apparent reason.

But the message of Lent is a message of hope and trust in the person of Jesus, our Saviour and redeemer, who says to each one of us, “I am with you until the end of time.” Despite appearances, the winter does eventually come to an end in the glorious new life which blossoms in the Springtime of God's infinite love and compassion. The Risen Christ is our Light and our Hope. Jesus, our Saviour invites each one of us to follow willingly and generously in his footsteps, and to be led by that light which no darkness can ever overcome. Each day we are invited to die a little more to the sin and selfishness which wounds the life of each one of us, and to grow in the light and love of Jesus Christ. We are invited to enter willingly and generously the narrow gate of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, for that is the way to die to the false self within us and grow into new people formed ever more deeply in the image and likeness of God.

In order to do that, Jesus tells us, *“If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me.”* The constant temptation is to turn in on ourselves, give way to selfishness, to fear and anxiety, becoming pessimistic and cynical. The temptation is to try and take a short cut to happiness and contentment, by looking for security and fulfilment in material comfort and the many pleasures offered by this world. The temptation is to think only of ourselves and our own needs and desires; to close ourselves off from the suffering around us and ignore the poverty and need of those worse off than ourselves. And here I speak not only of material poverty, but emotional, spiritual and mental poverty.

The antidote to these temptations is to be found first of all in prayer. Prayer, personal and liturgical, takes us out of ourselves and places us firmly in the hands of God. Right at the beginning of his Apostolic Exhortation on, *“The Joy of the Gospel”*, Pope Francis challenged every one of us when he wrote: *“I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them. I ask all of you to do this unfailingly, each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, ‘since no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord’ The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realise that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms.”*

So why not try this during Lent at the beginning of each day. Spend a few minutes in quiet, silent prayer, as individuals or as families, responding to God’s request to us through the psalmist in Psalm 45: *“Be still and know that I am God”*, and in Psalm 37, *“Be still before the Lord and wait in patience.”* These few minutes of silent prayer can be divided into three little petitions: *“Lord open my ears that I may hear; open my eyes that I may see; open my heart and rekindle within it the gift of the Holy Spirit, the fire of your love.”* What will we be asking for? First of all we are asking for the grace to hear the cries of the poor in our communities. Then we are asking for the grace to see those in need, in our own communities and in the wider world. And finally we are asking for a renewal of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, the fire of God’s love.

Lent is essentially an opportunity to be reborn and grow still more in the life of the Spirit. It’s a task which requires courage and effort. We are asked to open our hearts, through prayer, fasting and almsgiving, and to receive once again the gift of God’s love and mercy, allowing him to renew our lives so that we witness to the Good News of God’s love, mercy and compassion, especially to the poor and needy.

Let’s pray for each other during this season of Lent so that we may worthily celebrate the joy of Easter, the great Paschal mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer.

With an assurance of my prayers and blessing for you all,



Archbishop of Southwark

Given at Southwark, 4th February, 2018.