

Pastoral Letter

*To be read, or made available, on 27th November 2005
the 1st Sunday of Advent*

My dear People,

As we enter upon the season of Advent, it is important once again to grasp the grace of this holy time. As I have said before, it is a short season and one that can easily be submerged by preparations for Christmas. It is important that we be alert to the liturgy of Advent and attentive to the scripture readings that we hear at Mass. They speak to a very basic aspect of the human condition, namely, the fact that we are always looking forward, always waiting, always expecting. There is nothing we can do about the past, though we may look back either with gratitude or with regret. But the future is uncertain and therefore we look to the future both with hope and with apprehension. The liturgy of Advent teaches us how to look to the future and in doing so it speaks to the heart of human anxiety.

The future can seem threatening on all sorts of levels. Let us consider some of them. We are increasingly aware today of the many dangers to our natural environment. We all have a responsibility to do what we can to minimise the damage that is done to the environment both for our own sakes and for the sake of future generations. The natural world is a gift of which we are the stewards. As people who believe in the creation of heaven and earth we have a profound motive for respecting and preserving the world in which we live.

The future also holds the prospect of continuing war and terrorism. Tragically the conflicts between races can often take on a religious aspect. The conflict in the Holy Land can seem like a war between Muslims and Jews. The war in Iraq can be presented as an incursion into Muslim territory by the Christian West. Pope John Paul, whose death we mourned this year, was always quite unequivocal in his condemnation of all war and violence, yet, once again, we approach Christmas with the shadow of war hanging over the world. Here, too, we as Christians have a special responsibility in a world where racial and religious hatred fuel conflict and violence. As Catholics we affirm all that is true and good in other religions and we do this without prejudice to our faith in Jesus Christ

as Lord and Saviour of all humanity. During the year we have celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the relations of the Church to non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*. That document spoke of our unique bond with the Jewish people and of our special relationship with Islam. In Advent, when we await the Birth of the Prince of Peace, we pray for charity and understanding between the different religions of the world, and for an end to war and conflict.

Advent is also, of course, the beginning of the Church's year and we pray for renewal and new life in the Church. It is all too easy to catalogue the problems and crises that we face today and we should not minimise them. But I was greatly reassured by something that Pope Benedict said to the bishops attending the World Youth Day in Cologne last summer. He said that we already have all the resources we need for the future of the Church. We should be confident in what we have been given. Let us pray for a new outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are needed for renewal in the Church and for a new evangelisation.

In all of this the figure of Mary can be our teacher and guide. She was a Jewish woman, the "daughter of Sion". She was filled with the Holy Spirit and trusted in a future she did not understand. She recognised the wonders that God had done but she knew that it was only through the cross that God's purposes could be fulfilled. Our Lady is central to Advent. Let us pray that like her we may be filled with the Holy Spirit. Let us also look forward to the coming of the Lord, confident in his power and in our place in his plan of salvation.

With my blessing and greetings,

+Kevin
Archbishop of Southwark

Given at St George's Cathedral, Southwark
on 1st November 2005,
the Feast of All Saints