



PASTORAL LETTER
OF THE
MOST REVEREND BERNARD LONGLEY
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM
FOR THE 8th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 26/27 FEBRUARY 2022

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Never give in...keep on working at the Lord's work always.

I know that there are so many important and serious matters to claim our attention as we gather for Mass this Sunday. We are beginning to emerge from the restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic and to reflect on the personal as well as the global impact of the last two extraordinary years. We are reaching a pivotal moment on the Synodal Pathway, with the many valuable contributions from parishes, chaplaincies, Religious Orders, organisations and individuals currently being collated so as to shape our diocesan report.

We find ourselves again on the cusp of Lent, when Our Lord offers us a fresh opportunity to decide what is truly important in life and what can be discarded – what will enable us to be faithful and loving followers of Christ and what will only serve to lead us astray.

But perhaps above all this Sunday we are conscious of the worsening situation in Ukraine and the threat of war. On Wednesday, at his weekly audience, Pope Francis said: *Like me, many people throughout the world are feeling anguish and concern. Once again the peace of all is threatened by partisan interests ... I would like all those who have the political responsibility to make a serious examination of conscience before God, who is the God of peace and not of war ... He wants us to be brothers and not enemies.*

The Holy Father has asked us to fast for peace on Ash Wednesday and to pray that *the Queen of Peace will preserve the world from the madness of war.* I have asked all our priests to offer a Votive Mass for the Preservation of Peace and Justice during this week. I know that you will join me in praying for the people of Ukraine, remembering especially the clergy and parishioners of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church together with my brother bishop, the Ukrainian Eparch Bishop Kenneth Nowakowski.

These are sombre times to be approaching Lent, far from the mood of carnival so often associated with Shrovetide. There is so much in the news to make us frown with disapproval. But we cannot afford to cast a critical eye on all that is happening around us if it causes us to forget what also lies within us: *for a man's words flow out of what fills his heart.*

As we prepare for Lent it is good to recall that Shrovetide signifies the time for confessing our sins and repairing our relationship with God and with one another. In his Message for Lent, Pope Francis writes: *Lent is a favourable time for personal and community renewal, as it leads us to the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For our Lenten journey in 2022, we will do well to reflect on Saint Paul's exhortation to the Galatians: "Let us not grow tired of doing good, for in due time we shall reap our harvest, if we do not give up"*.

Today's reading from St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians carries the same encouragement: *Never give in...keep on working at the Lord's work always*. The best way to begin our Lenten pilgrimage and to sustain us along the way is by seeking God's forgiveness through the sacraments. Once again, the Holy Father urges us in his Lenten Message: *Let us not grow tired of asking for forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, knowing that God never tires of forgiving*.

Being forgiven through the power of the Holy Spirit, and in a sacramental manner that leaves no room for doubt, is a compelling motive for seeking to forgive those who may have hurt or wronged us. Among some remarkable examples of forgiveness over recent days I was particularly struck and moved by the Christian witness of the sister of Fr Jacques Hamel who was murdered at the altar during Mass in 2016.

Rosaline Hamel decided to reach out to the mother of one of the men accused of murdering her brother. She explained: *I thought, 'What if it was my son who, despite the education I had given him, had taken the wrong path to the point of becoming an assassin? How great would my pain have been then?' Her faith in Christ enabled her to find forgiveness in her heart – not to condemn but to console, so that, in her own words: we could handle our pain together*.

Forgiving is the Lord's work. He readily forgives us when we humbly ask his mercy – and he brings forgiveness through us when we find the grace and the strength to forgive others. We can find that grace in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation – the place where we learn to notice and take out *the plank that is in our own eye* so that we can see clearly again.

I wish you every blessing this Lent and I echo the Holy Father's prayer for all of us: *May the Virgin Mary ... obtain for us the gift of patience. May she accompany us with her maternal presence, so that this season of conversion may bring forth the fruits of eternal salvation*.

Yours devotedly in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Bernard Longley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

✠Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham

Given at Birmingham on the 24 February 2022 and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Archdiocese on the 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time (26/27 February 2022)