



THE ARCHDIOCESE *of* BIRMINGHAM

PASTORAL LETTER FOR THE 4TH SUNDAY OF LENT 18/19 MARCH 2023

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

God does not see as man sees: man looks at appearances but the Lord looks at the heart.

Our annual pilgrimage through Lent has reached its mid-point. In the midst of our acts of penance and self-denial Laetare Sunday invites us to look forward in hope towards the Easter celebration that lies ahead. On this occasion I would also like to greet all the mothers in our families and parish communities and to thank you for your loving witness as parents and as women of faith.

We have just listened to St John's Gospel with its account of the healing of the man who had been blind from birth. People who have a sight impairment often have great insight into the world around them. From the Gospel story it is clear that this man placed his trust in Our Lord. He did not hesitate to do what the Lord asked of him, even though he could not foresee the consequences.

There are many moments when we are asked, as individuals or as the Church, to place our trust fully in Christ – to acknowledge that we cannot see the full picture yet – and to pray that he will let us see our lives and our mission as he can see them. This has been very much my prayer as we have tried to develop a diocesan vision for the future – a future that lies entirely in the Lord's hands but which he needs us to bring about in his name.

By now you will be familiar with our diocesan vision statement which says:

***We are called to be a Catholic diocese which is:
faithful to the mission entrusted to us by Jesus Christ
full of missionary disciples who work together co-responsibly
in vibrant communities of faith,
joyful in their service of God and neighbour.***

In order to make this a living reality within the parishes and deaneries of the Archdiocese I have asked our clergy to reflect, among themselves and with you, on the present pattern of parish life and the people and resources that sustain it.



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I am asking you over the coming months to notice and record where and how our diocesan priorities of evangelisation, formation, liturgy and worship and social outreach are already flourishing. I am also asking you to notice where they are not so evident and to see how parishes can work together, in one or more of these areas, to strengthen the Church's local mission.

Over the next few months, please do what you can to respond to the invitation to reflect as priests and people together. Try to see co-responsibly what needs to change for the good of the Church's mission within your parish or across the wider deanery. Try to ensure that young people and families are a particular area of focus for your parish's mission.

In St John's Gospel it isn't only the man who had been blind from birth who has limited vision. When the Pharisees are consulted they only see a reason to disapprove and criticise Our Lord's miracle. Because *it had been a sabbath day* they say: *This man cannot be from God: he does not keep the sabbath.* It is only the man whose sight was restored who can say of Jesus: *He is a prophet.*

We hear an echo of this spiritual disability in today's reading from the First Book of Samuel. Despite their promising appearance, none of Jesse's sons is chosen as king until David is brought in from the fields and immediately anointed by Samuel. We learn that *God does not see as man sees: man looks at appearances but the Lord looks at the heart.*

In order to see as the Lord sees we need the Holy Spirit to bring us together as the Body of Christ. All the baptised are called to share in the Lord's ministry as priest, prophet and king. Priests have a sacramental share in the Priesthood of Christ and a mandate to teach, sanctify and lead his holy people in praise of God and in service of our neighbour. Our Lord invites us to use these charisms together for the building-up of his body, the Church.

As we journey through Lent and with the approach of Holy Week we are called to repentance. We aim to see ourselves as the Lord sees – not looking at appearances but at the heart. We aim to look more deeply at the life and mission of the Church so that in every place we can be more faithful to the mission entrusted to us by Our Lord. We ask the Lord to heal us, as he healed the man who had been blind from birth, so that we may see the risen Christ and come to share in his new life this Easter.

With my thanks for your faithfulness this Lent and asking the prayers of Our Lady, Mother of the Church and St Joseph, Protector of the Church.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

+ Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham