



DIOCESE OF SALFORD

Pastoral Letter of the Right Reverend John Arnold Bishop of Salford

To be read and circulated on the weekend of 13th/14th February 2021

My dear brothers and sisters,

I certainly had hoped that this letter would not need to be written and that by Lent 2021 we would have returned to free access to our churches which could fill to capacity and have no need for special sanitising and social distancing. I had thought we might be free of face masks and at liberty to talk together as we left church. That is not to be so. It is possible that some restrictions may be lifted during Lent, but some will undoubtedly remain. We must accept the circumstances in which we find ourselves and establish guidelines and encouragement for the Season of Lent, while keeping one another safe.

There is no doubt that the sense of celebrating “Church at Home” has appealed to many people during this past year and borne fruit for a more personal spirituality, without losing the sense of the parish community. If our personal prayer is strengthened during this difficult time, the sense of community can be the stronger as we emerge from lockdown and other restrictions. I remain very grateful for all the initiatives taken to maintain good contact and communication, especially with the housebound and isolated members of our communities.

There are the three signposts for our attention during Lent: Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving. These are themes for self-examination. Can they be the means for challenging ourselves, particularly in the experience of the Covid-pandemic, for re-setting our priorities, and stimulating action and change?

I am preparing videos to be available during Lent on each of these themes by which I would hope to invite you to review your own personal understanding and response to each one.

Prayer:

I would like to encourage a sense of freedom in prayer. We have, of course, our important formula prayers such as the Our Father and Hail Mary, and all the prayers of our liturgies, but I wonder how free people feel about prayer as a conversation, a chat, with God or with the saints? I wonder, too, how we feel about where we pray? Do we realise that we can effectively pray at home, in the street, at our workplace? Prayer does not have to be in church. We can talk to God in prayer at anytime, anywhere. There are lots of resources online these days, for example Pray as You Go, which can help us to pray on the way to work or when out walking or in a quiet place at home. You can find the website easily enough; PRAY AS YOU GO (www.pray-as-you-go.org)

Fasting:

Fasting has its role in all the major world religions. It promotes a sense of self-discipline and can be a means by which we prepare for prayer or some form of spiritual exercise. In our own context, living as

we do in one of the most prosperous countries in the world, we might employ fasting to recognise just how much we have in comparison to so many of our brothers and sisters. Please remember the CAFOD Family Fast Day this year on Friday 26th February. Even if you cannot pick up one of the CAFOD envelopes from church, do please fast in some way and give the money you save to help CAFOD help others. Once again, the CAFOD website is easy to find; (www.cafod.org.uk) – and you might even want to sign up for this year's CAFOD Walk for Water initiative.

Almsgiving:

Our understanding of fasting might well help us to be aware of the increasing disparity between the rich and the poor in our world. Even in our advanced technological age we are failing to care for one another, and we see the rich getting richer and the poor poorer. 1% of the world's population has 50% of the world's wealth. There can be no justification for that, especially when so many people in that 99% live in abject poverty, dying of starvation. Almsgiving helps us to begin to right this wrong. It is not a matter of us being generous to those in need but beginning to tip the balance in the right direction. We need to recognise also that we do not have to look to the distance to acknowledge poverty, it is very evident in the streets of our own cities and towns. In this year dedicated to St. Joseph, I commend to you the work of Caritas Diocese of Salford, known to many of you from your school days as St. Joseph's Penny. If you can, simply look online for Caritas Salford (www.caritassalford.org.uk)

If you do not have access to the internet, I hope the information about these suggestions will be printed in your parish newsletters or available in church. They are only suggestions – there are many ways of making this Lent holy.

Some of our churches are closed at this time and may remain so for some weeks to come. Ash Wednesday will be celebrated in some of our churches and the ashes will be sprinkled on our heads rather than marked on our foreheads. Careful consideration will be given to the way that we may be able to celebrate Holy Week so please watch for news about your local church. There remains no obligation to attend Mass at this time, but you are welcome to live-stream one of the many Masses being celebrated in the Diocese and beyond. I hope that you will be able to sense the importance of the Season of Lent for yourselves and see how God is at work in your lives, even – and particularly – in these strangest of times.

Lent, of course, means springtime. The new life is beginning to break through the soil all around us. May we, after all these months, prepare to celebrate the new life of Easter.

Lent must be different this year because of the pandemic and the restrictions imposed on our ability to meet together. Let us take the opportunity to consider Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving in a new way and give time to the challenges that these present to each one of us.

And throughout Lent we pray "Stay with us, Lord, on our Journey".

God bless you all,

+John

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