



**PASTORAL LETTER
OF THE
MOST REVEREND BERNARD LONGLEY
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM
FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT, 13/14 MARCH 2021**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

When we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life with Christ.

It is a great joy to greet you today as we reach the mid-point of Lent. Our journey together to Easter is well on its way and the Church wishes to raise our spirits by calling this Laetare Sunday – a day to share the happiness of our faith in Christ. By custom this is also Mothering Sunday and I would like to greet all the mothers present at Mass today – and those taking part through live-streaming - and to thank them for their loving example.

The season of Lent this year has taken on an extra significance. Our annual penitential journey from darkness into light, through the cross to the Resurrection, is mirrored by our struggle to overcome the coronavirus. We share with the rest of the world the hopeful journey from the worries and losses and restrictions of the pandemic towards the relative freedom that restored health and the guarantee of vaccination can bring.

Looking ahead, this year the ceremonies of Holy Week will be simpler and shorter than usual, but it is still a great blessing that we can come together to celebrate the Paschal Mystery of the Lord's death and Resurrection. This represents the very core of our faith and we catch a resonant echo of it in today's scripture readings.

St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians points us to what is really important: *God loved us with so much love that he was generous with his mercy.* The love of God is merciful – it brings forgiveness. The cross of Christ is the most powerful instrument and symbol of God's mercy and forgiveness. This gift is needed more than ever in a world that is inclined to withhold forgiveness and the healing that it brings.

Last weekend Pope Francis was in Iraq. Last Sunday he visited Mosul and met with the Christians who are still there after so much persecution. They gathered to greet him in Church Square, surrounded by the ruins of their churches, yet joyful that the Holy Father had come as a sign of hope for the future. At the heart of his message was the Lord's gift of forgiveness:

Jesus not only cleanses us of our sins, but gives us a share in his own power and wisdom. He liberates us from the narrow and divisive notions of family, faith and community that divide, oppose and exclude, so that we can build a Church and a society open to everyone and concerned for our brothers and sisters in greatest need. At the same time, he strengthens us to resist the temptation to seek revenge, which only plunges us into a spiral of endless retaliation.

We see the depths and power of God's loving forgiveness, according to St Paul, when we understand that it is being offered to us and is effective even **before** we repent: *When we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life with Christ.* The challenge is there - for us to forgive those who may have hurt or wronged us even before they have shown that they are sorry.

Yes, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. It can be a struggle for us to love those who oppose our faith and reject its message but there can be no evangelisation without love. Love requires us to overcome the indignation or hurt we may feel in the face of opposition and to show forgiveness and understanding.

A priest friend of mine – in another diocese - taught me an important lesson about acceptance and forgiveness. He had a particularly difficult parishioner who – for several complex reasons – found fault with everything he did. I asked the priest whether he resented this criticism but he replied: *No – this parishioner has become my Guardian Angel – he stops me making mistakes and he makes me think twice.*

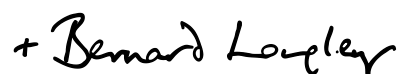
I wish I could always be as generous as that! It is the little things that we do that make all the difference. In the remaining weeks of Lent we can try to be forgiving. We may not be able to kiss the wood of the cross this Good Friday but we can each bring a personal act of forgiveness to the crucified Lord, lifted up for our salvation, and ask to be forgiven ourselves. *The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.*

This coming Wednesday we celebrate the feast of St Patrick, who in the fifth-century brought the same Gospel of repentance and forgiveness to the people of Ireland. Despite having been held there in captivity as a slave for six years he didn't go back to seek revenge. Instead, in a spirit of forgiveness he went to preach the Gospel and to share the gift of faith. Please pray for the people of Ireland - and of Nigeria - on their patronal feastday.

Friday of this week will be an important feastday for the universal Church. We are celebrating the Year of St Joseph, proclaimed by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde*. The Holy Father writes: *In Joseph, Jesus saw the tender love of God: "As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him"*. St Joseph quietly witnessed to the power of forgiveness in the life of the Holy Family, leaving an impression that lay deep within the Sacred Heart.

With such witnesses to encourage us there can be nothing to hold us back from the forgiveness of God. *When we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life with Christ.* May we all catch a glimpse of the joy and the new life of Easter today, lightening our burdens and lifting our hearts in thankful praise.

Yours devotedly in Christ



✠Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham

Given at Birmingham on the 11 March 2021 and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Archdiocese on the Fourth Sunday of Lent (13/14 March 2021).