



A PASTORAL LETTER

To be read at all Masses on the Third Sunday of Advent

13th December 2020

My dear brothers and sisters,

I write on a Sunday of great rejoicing, traditionally known as “Gaudete or Rejoice Sunday.” For the Mass begins with Saint Paul’s words which urge every Christian to rejoice.ⁱ Joy is the hallmark of the Christian life, a joy from which no one can be excluded.

The Church’s call to rejoice may seem discordant at the end of a year marked by so much anxiety, isolation and loss; and so we must recognise the source of our joy at Christmas. In the darkness and suffering of their own times, the prophets anticipated this joy; in today’s Gospel, the last of the prophets - Saint John the Baptist - announces that “*there stands among you – unknown to you – the One who is coming*”.ⁱⁱ Our joy is found then, in knowing and loving Christ our Lord. “*Rejoice in the Lord*” says the Apostle, for we will be joyful insofar as we recognise that “*the Lord is very near*”.ⁱⁱⁱ

It was a great sadness to see the doors of our churches close during Lent in co-operation with public health measures; yet we remained united in prayer by many and often creative means, until the return of the Mass and the Sacraments came with an outpouring of joy. Again, it came as a bitter blow last month when Parliament took the dangerous and unprecedented step of declaring public worship in England illegal. Yet this inspired across the Diocese, an equally unprecedented witness to the essential place of worship in our lives. Many of you wrote to Members of Parliament testifying how worship can never be reduced to the “non-essential.” This reminded of me of the Christians of the first centuries who had declared “*we cannot live without Sunday*.”^{iv} Neither can we live without the joy found in the Eucharist and the spirit of service and charity which flows from this Sacrifice and Sacrament. The Diocese might appear in some ways diminished at the end of a year of many trials, yet we have also surely grown stronger in that joy which nothing can take away.

Through the dark days of winter into brighter days ahead, we must keep alive the joy of our witness to the mystery of Christmas, God-with-us. We have turned to Saint Joseph as a guide as we emerge from this crisis, to learn how to remain in the joy of Christ's coming, the joy the Apostle describes today as knowing "*God has called us and will not fail us*".^v Pope Francis has called the whole Church to celebrate a *Year of Saint Joseph* until 8th December 2021. The Holy Father writes "*Each of us can discover Saint Joseph – the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence – an intercessor, a support and guide in times of trouble*".^{vi}

In the circumstances of the first Christmas, we see how Our Lady and Saint Joseph were brought to near destitution; faced the threats of a homicidal ruler; and shared the plight of refugees in a strange land, yet never lost that unfailing joy which Christ's Nativity brought and the joy of remaining in His Presence. If this Christmas brings its own share of difficulties and disappointments for us, then we are in good company! Yet, nothing can take away the joy of recognising the One who is already in our midst, the Lord who is very near to us.

As we prepare for Christmas 2020 and the challenges of a New Year to come, a prayer addressing Saint Joseph with the words of Scripture might help us enter more deeply into the great joy of "Christ's Mass":

O Blessed Joseph, happy man, to whom it was given not only to see and hear the God whom many kings longed to see, but did not see, and longed to hear but did not hear; but you were privileged even to bear Him in your arms, to embrace Him, to clothe Him, and to watch over Him.

In the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist, may we share the joy of Saint Joseph.

Wishing you all the joy of Christmas and a blessed New Year,

+ Mark

Bishop of Shrewsbury

ⁱ Cf. Phil. 4:4

ⁱⁱ Jn. 1:27

ⁱⁱⁱ Phil. 4:5

^{iv} The Martyrs of Abitene, 304 AD

^v I Thess. 5:24

^{vi} Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde* 8th December 2020