



Pastoral Letter
to be read at all Masses
in the Archdiocese of Liverpool
on the Third Sunday of Advent
12/13 December 2020

Dear Friends,

Today is often called *Gaudete* (Latin for rejoice) Sunday because the entrance antiphon of the mass begins with the words, “Rejoice in the Lord always ...” from St Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. We are halfway through the season of Advent and we celebrate a moment of Christmas anticipation. Indeed, we have much to be happy about. After a very tough time things are beginning to change for the better. A vaccine is becoming available to combat the virus which has devastated our way of life bringing death to and suffering to many people, unemployment to others and has restricted the movements of us all. We are also looking forward to seeing our loved ones and families at Christmas, and for some who are in residential care this will be a first meeting for several months. So, let us rejoice, and give thanks for the joy that awaits us.

Nevertheless, Advent is always a very challenging time for Christians who take their faith seriously. This is because it is a time of waiting and waiting can be very unnerving. I don't know anyone who likes waiting; whether it is waiting in a queue at the supermarket checkout or waiting for a train or even waiting for Christmas. Today you are probably waiting to be vaccinated against the coronavirus and that brings its own anxieties. Waiting means acceptance of things which are outside our control. No matter how worked up we may get, the train is not going to arrive any sooner because of our anxiety. We may put up our Christmas tree today, but Christmas comes on 25 December and not a moment sooner. Part of the frustration we all feel about waiting is that when the waiting is over,

we may be faced with disappointment. The holiday for which we saved all year ends up being ruined by bad weather and delayed flights. But sometimes we are pleasantly surprised. The future would be much less troublesome for us if we could control it, and then waiting would be easier on our nerves.

A Christian approach to waiting is to understand the future as God's future - that is not as coming events which have been totally planned and prepared by us, so that there are no surprises, but as a time which comes to us full of the unexpected and brimming over with God's grace. That is not very easy for us to grasp because we all work to plans and 'to do' lists. If we are not careful, we can plan God out of our lives, or what is just as bad, we may give just enough space to God to make our life pleasant for the time being. The pandemic we are enduring may have cured us of that attitude to life this year but every year we are given the season of Advent to remind us that God cannot be planned for. The future is not of our making but is a gift from God. God comes to us in unexpected ways: a baby in a manger, in the Eucharist under the signs of bread and wine, in the Scriptures and often the acts of love we show to each other. Just look at the wonderful explosion of love that has showed itself in the way that we have supported each other through these dark months. Every act of kindness to a lonely or hungry person has been an example of Christ working through each of us. We did not plan any of this and in a similar way we cannot plan for God intervening in our lives, except to be open to him at all times, and to fully use God's gift of himself. We must wait patiently in the assurance that God will guide us and lead us to a new stage in the life of our diocese. Yet we must also prepare and plan for the future using all the gifts of our people. The work of **Synod 2020** has continued through the internet and social media and we are well on course for our meeting in June next year when we open our hearts to God. Adopting this 'Advent' attitude will ensure that our future will be vibrant and full of the life of the Holy Spirit, because the future that awaits us is God's will for us, and not our plans for him!

Over the next two weeks you will be preparing for the Christ-child to come into your lives once more. Make a welcome for him by turning once again to the Lord who is ever-loving, as well as getting ready for family celebrations. Always show concern for those who cannot take part in such festivities because they are unemployed or homeless, or because they are far from home.

May God bless you in this holy season, and bring you much peace at Christmas,

+ Malcolm McMahon OP

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