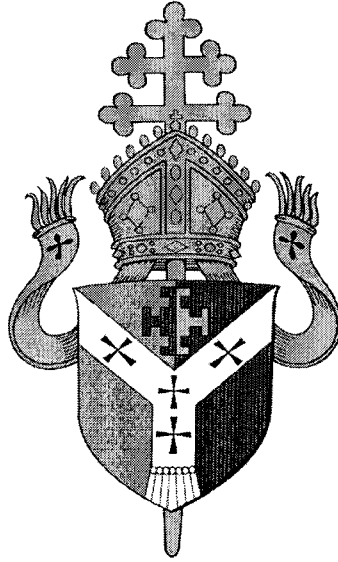


ARCHDIOCESE OF BIRMINGHAM



**PASTORAL LETTER
OF THE
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM
THE MOST REVEREND BERNARD LONGLEY
FOR 6th SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
14 FEBRUARY 2010**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

This Sunday we find ourselves on the threshold of Lent. We still have a few days before we enter this great season of grace and these days give us a little time to prepare. As we do so I am conscious of being with you for the first time on our Lenten pilgrimage towards Easter. I hope that my few reflections following today's Scripture readings may help us sense our unity in Christ as we approach the coming forty days. Writing my first Pastoral Letter certainly makes me conscious of my unity with you, within the family of the diocese, as we move together towards Lent.

Every threshold offers an important choice and the threshold of Lent is no exception. The choice lies before us every year as Ash Wednesday draws close. Are we ready to cross the threshold and go into this season following Christ so that we can enter more deeply into the mystery of his death and resurrection? Are we prepared to accompany him and one another into Lent so that we may eventually enter into the joy of Easter transformed and renewed?

The prophet Jeremiah illustrates the choice before us in terms of a curse and a blessing. It is a curse when we decide to trust in ourselves, for then we become *like dry scrub in the wastelands*. But when we agree to trust in the Lord we become *like a tree by the waterside that never ceases to bear fruit*. We can choose to trust in the Lord by consciously and wholeheartedly walking with him and depending upon him as we cross over the threshold into Lent.

St Luke reveals something fundamental about the choice before us in his account of the beatitudes. In our Lord's teaching those who are truly blessed, although they suffer, are set alongside those who are really deprived, even though they have plenty. This is a reminder that God does not see as the world sees. Poverty and hunger, sadness and rejection by others can lead to a deeper happiness when they enable us to find and depend upon God (and we surely also have our part to play in showing God's goodness and love to all who suffer in these ways). Riches and fulfilment, laughter and the good opinion of others will always deprive us of true happiness when they make us forgetful of God's presence. Finding true happiness means seeing our lives in the light of God's truth as we cross the threshold of Lent.

These are Lenten insights of faith that we want to share with the world around us. Lent is a season that we have to experience personally, yet it can never be something entirely private. In the Church we sense our unity with one another as we encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ to make a good beginning to Lent. But we also have an opportunity to give witness to others in the local community, especially as they see us gathering on Ash Wednesday for the symbolic moment that starts us on this Lenten journey.

We can begin Lent wholeheartedly if we choose today to renew our commitment to prayer, self-denial and almsgiving. Prayer underpins our trust in the Lord, holding us close to him as the foundation of our lives and giving us a clearer vision of the way ahead. Self-denial helps us to live the life of the beatitudes day by day, more readily aware of our dependence on God and of the blessings we can so easily take for granted. Almsgiving is a call to be generous, to notice the needs of others and to respond with a compassion that can deepen the likeness of Christ within us. These three help us to see ourselves and the world around us illuminated by the light of Christ.

In the days leading up to Ash Wednesday we have time once again to make our commitment to Christ as his disciples so that our observance of Lent may be of benefit not only to ourselves but also to others. Let us pray for one another within our parish community that together we may be strengthened and make good choices this Lent. Please pray for those who will assemble in the Cathedral next Sunday for the Rite of Election, when the Church recognises their desire to be fully part of our Catholic communities and calls them to be received into full communion at Easter. Pray also that the choices we all make this Lent will cause us to trust more and more in Christ so that each of us may become *like a tree by the waterside that never ceases to bear fruit*.

I pray that each of us may be blessed with a joyful and fruitful Lent. May we come refreshed and renewed to accompany our Lord in his death and resurrection in the Holy Week that leads to the joy of Easter.

+ Bernard Longley

✠Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham

Given at Birmingham on 11 February 2010 and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Diocese on the weekend of 13/14 February 2010