



**PASTORAL LETTER
OF THE
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM
THE MOST REVEREND VINCENT NICHOLS
ON
HOPE**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ

Recently, Pope Benedict published an Encyclical Letter on the Christian virtue of hope. I want to put before you just a few of its themes as preparation for the forthcoming season of Lent.

In his Letter, the Holy Father describes how, in the past, the figure of Christ the King would be seen at the east end of a church, high above the altar. As people entered they would see ahead of them the King of all creation drawing them to Himself, through the prayer of the Mass. In the same way, above the door at the west end of the church, would be the image of the Last Judgement. This they would see as they left Mass, reminding them of how daily life is to be lived. Both images, the King and the Judgement, tell us what lies ahead and what must guide our daily living. These are the themes for reflection during Lent.

When we ponder the Last Judgement we probably think first of heaven and hell. But what about this Judgement itself? How are we to understand it? We can think of it as being the Last Word spoken over our life, the Final Word over the history of our world.

What will this Final Word be? Will the final word spoken of us be the record of the mistakes we have made, the damage we have inflicted and endured? Will the final word about our human history be the summary of the atrocities committed in the name of progress, or an account of the millions of displaced and starving people? Are these the Final Word about us and our lives, a word about our hopeless condition and our failure?

Faith opens up for us a different prospect. In faith we believe that another word has been spoken at the beginning of time and will be spoken at its ending. This other word is a word both of judgement and mercy. It is therefore a word of hope. This word is a person: Jesus, the King and the Merciful Judge before whom each of us will stand. He will be the Final Word spoken over the life of each of us. He is the Last Word of our history. He is the giver of the Last Judgement we will all receive.

Our Catholic faith teaches us that this last act is both an act of judgement and of mercy. As an act of judgement everything will be taken into account. Sometimes we are inclined to say that since God is so loving, in the end our sins are of no account, simply disappearing in the splendour of God's love. But this is not so. An account must be given and justice must be done. Our instinct and longing for justice is not misplaced. Evil has to be accounted for. That is the purpose of the Last Judgement.

Indeed we can say that only in this final moment, when all is revealed, can true justice be achieved. We know, often from bitter experience, that left to ourselves we cannot deliver true justice. Whether within family conflicts, or in courts and tribunals, our human attempts at justice are unsatisfactory. Something always remains hidden. Despite our best efforts, our world is still riddled with injustices.

So we can say that only God who sees all things can deliver true justice. In this important sense, without God we are a people without true hope.

Our faith tells us that this Last Judgement is also an action of God's mercy. As we stand before the Just Judge, he sees with total clarity the kind of life we have lived. As Pope Benedict says, at that moment it no longer matters what we once were in history: forceful, successful, important, or not. What matters is what we are in truth. At that moment all that we have built on false foundations will appear to be mere straw, pure bluster. It will collapse. What matters is that the Just Judge can also see within us, despite the stain of our sins, whether we have at least continued to reach out towards Christ, towards truth, towards love.

Under the gaze of this Judgement, as St Paul tells us (1 Cor 3.12-15), all that is unworthy within us is burned away, consumed in the fire of His love. As Pope Benedict teaches, the loving gaze of Christ, the gaze of his unending love, will fill us with the pain of our failure and bring about a powerful transformation within us "as through fire". This is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love, first expressed and experienced in his Passion, sears through us, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God. Through this purifying love, painful though it is, we are prepared for entrance into our heavenly home. This is the gift of mercy.

This process of purification we have always known as purgatory. It is the process demanded by justice, by which the wrongs of our past life, which we try so hard to forget, are not forgotten but accounted for. This is also the process of merciful love, the source of our hope for today. The promise of this mercy means that we do not despair or give up in the face of sin and failure. Rather we look to the moment when we will be freed of all that burden.

As we contemplate what lies ahead of us, we may also be thinking of those who have already died and face this Last Judgement. An important part of our Catholic tradition is that we pray for the dead, assisting them as they stand before the Lord in that timeless moment of Judgement. The best way of doing so is to ask that a celebration of the Mass be held with the deceased person as the focus of its prayer. In this way we ask God to look with great mercy on this person, even as Christ offers Himself in sacrifice in the action of every Mass, to the Father of all mercies. As the Pope writes in this Letter, because time is as one in God, it is never too late to pray for those who have died. Our prayer can play a small part in their purification. Our hope is never simply for ourselves; it is always for each other.

These themes are central to our devotions during Lent. In the weeks ahead we must look again at how we live our lives, the things in which we put our trust. We do so knowing that a Final Word will be given about our life, given in justice and in mercy at the Last Judgement. This is a prospect of great consolation and hope for us all. Thankfully we are not left at the mercy of fickle public opinion or of fate. We are in the hands of the living God, with faith and love for Our Lord who alone is our true and lasting hope.

May this Lent be a blessed time for you all.



✠ Vincent Nichols
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