



DIOCESE OF SALFORD

Pastoral Letter of the Right Reverend John Arnold Bishop of Salford for the Feast of Christ the King 2020

Jesus has been born into the brokenness of our world.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Because there have been such impressive initiatives in the parishes to build up communication during this time of pandemic and lockdown, I am confident that this letter will reach recipients throughout the Diocese. I have been aware of regular, even daily, messages from priests to their parish communities, weekly newsletters and live streaming of Masses and services and of personal connection with isolated and housebound members of our parishes. Sincere thanks to all those who have done so much to ensure that there have been such good levels of communication. I am writing now as we approach the close of the Church's year and as we look forward to the beginning of the Season of Advent and our preparations for Christmas.

I certainly do not want to dismiss the difficulties that so many people have had to face in these recent months, and the continuing challenges as this pandemic rolls on. And people have been so generous, in many and diverse ways, in caring for their neighbours. My thanks, also, for the great generosity and thoughtfulness shown to our priests during this time of two lockdowns, understanding the difficulties they have faced in adapting their ministry. Those thanks extend to the many volunteers who have ensured that our churches have been the safest places for indoor gatherings and allowed them to open once that initial lockdown was over. After this second lockdown, I am sure we will open our churches safely again, when allowed to do so.

While recognising all the difficulties, we have to ask what possibilities and opportunities are uniquely presented to us in our current situation? We must emerge from this pandemic with a sense of vision and with renewed priorities. Our Christmas celebrations will have to be different, but they can, and must, be important to us. I think it is true to say that Christmas has become increasingly secularised in recent years. The accent has been on presents, decorations, parties and family gatherings – all perfectly reasonable and good in themselves, but there has been almost no public and media mention of the Christmas Story which is the foundational reason for all this celebration. The crib is rarely seen in public places and we are not reminded of the gift of Christ's birth and presence among us.

This year we must celebrate Christmas in a different way. Assuming that our churches will be open but still having a limited capacity, we will return to the ancient tradition of observing the Christmas Octave and I invite everyone, able to do so, to attend a Christmas Mass on at least one of the days during the Octave, from Christmas Eve through to New Year's Day. Each parish will have its own arrangements for managing its capacity. During those days there are important Feasts which can be celebrated specifically in the light of Christmas. We will also provide some resources for the family at home, and resources for children.

Can we connect more closely with the simplicity of Christmas and the importance of what God is saying to us in the birth of His Son? That First Christmas was the story of a family without home or security. God's Son is born in a stable. A few shepherds, among the humblest of people of the day, are given the great privilege of being called to witness what is happening. I enjoy contemplating the simple crib setting with Mary and Joseph, shepherds and the ox and ass.

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There is a silent adoration of the new-born baby. There is no need for words. We have the wonder of silently gazing on the presence of God among us. There is surely a wonderful sense of hope and reassurance in that scene.

This family then must become refugees and flee from the wrath of King Herod, into Egypt. God is uniting His new-born Son with the homeless, the rejected, the poor and the insecurity that surrounds so many people in our own generation. We need to remember the real Christmas Story if we are to truly celebrate its importance. And this year, when families cannot meet in large numbers, and Christmas must be very different – the invitation is there to remind ourselves of what this feast is really all about. **Jesus has been born into the brokenness of our world.**

He comes to share our reality and to lead us in truth. As we celebrate Christmas this year, we have every reason to be confident that, out of the many difficulties and problems that face our world today, progress can be made in seeking justice and peace and care for our brothers and sisters and our common home.

It is also a time to recognise, with thanks, all that we have and the good things that surround us; those qualities of life which everyone should enjoy. Looking beyond Christmas, into 2021, there will need to be a lot of careful consideration given to our ministry and programmes in the Diocese. We need to consider how best to provide the sacramental preparation for our young people, the ways of preparing people for reception into the Church, for those preparing for marriage. There is a need for more resources to help us in strengthening a spirituality of “Church at home”. It can be a time for all of us to reinforce and develop our personal faith. I have begun discussions about how we might most effectively provide for our present circumstances and I will hope to explain the arrangements early in the New Year. And our planning cannot just be about a catching up on things delayed and postponed in 2020. We must also be thinking and planning for our continuing journey as a Diocese – a “Journey to 2030” and beyond. Pope Francis is leading the Church – and speaking to the whole world – through these most difficult and challenging times. He is not afraid to warn us of the reality of Climate Change, to speak of our care for our brothers and sisters and our common home. He identifies the need for change from our localised thinking, to a sense of global encounter and dialogue. We face serious challenges, but Pope Francis always speaks with Hope. There is still time for us to change, to repair and to renew - and our prayer must be the foundation of all our actions, decisions and choices. In the sadness of these days, we remember especially those suffering from the virus, those who have died and those who have lost family members and friends in the pandemic. We also remember those whose own suffering or loss has been overshadowed by a focus on the pandemic. We give thanks for the commitment of so many in the Health Service and those who provide other essential services at this time. We pray for that resilience by which we will build a better world for all our brothers and sisters. We pray for one another and our journey together.

May God bless you and keep you safe and well – assured always of His love

“Stay with us, Lord, on our Journey”