

Pastoral Letter for the First Sunday of Advent

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In today's first reading the prophet Isaiah speaks in desperation to a people exiled from their homeland - they cannot worship in the temple and they have been sinners, even rebels, against God. The prophet prays for his people, "Oh that You would tear the heavens open and come down!"

In Christ the prayer of Isaiah finds its fulfilment. During Advent Christians remember with deep joy and gratitude the coming amongst us of the Son of God.

The keynote at the beginning of every Advent is the urgent need for vigilance. In today's Gospel our Lord tells us, "Be on your guard, stay awake, because you never know when the time will come".

During Advent our Sunday readings will focus on the witness of John the Baptist and Mary the mother of Jesus:-

-For John the encounter with Jesus Christ has immediate and life-changing consequences. On meeting Jesus John says, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". John then gives up his own ministry to follow Jesus - "He must increase and I must decrease."

- For Mary her total openness to the will of God means that she will be known as, 'the First Disciple of the Lord' (Pope St John Paul II), and 'the Great Believer' (Pope Emeritus Benedict).

Isaiah longed to do the will of God and see God's kingdom on earth. When the first Christian disciples met Jesus - the Way, the Truth and the Life - they saw with great certainty what they needed to do and in whose company they needed to travel.

Since Lent 2016 Stewards of the Gospel and their helpers have been active in every parish; they have worked alongside parishioners, clergy and other members of the diocese to develop a vision for our future rooted in the will of God.

After much reflection and discussion in meetings throughout the diocese the *First Formal Proposal for the Renewal and Restructuring of Our Diocese* has been completed. Nothing is set in stone and more dialogue, prayer and discernment must follow - we can be bold in our shared vocation as followers and companions of Jesus Christ.

Isaiah, whose intuitions of Christ led Saint Jerome to call him 'the evangelical prophet' gives a wonderful prayer for those who long to discern the will of God-

*You guide those who act with integrity and keep your ways in mind.
Lord, You are our Father;
we the clay, You the potter,
we are all the work of your hand.*

When I began the Stewards of the Gospel initiative I was guided by the words of Pope St John Paul II who called for the development of "Consultation and the

collaboration of the lay faithful, women and men” including “dialogue and discernment as well”. Pope Francis also encourages us - “The faithful very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations” (Amoris Laetitia n37).

With great confidence I continue to entrust the future of the diocese to the care of our Lady of Lourdes who 'because she was 'full of grace' knew that nothing is impossible to God.

Yours in Christ and Mary,

+Alan Williams, sm
Bishop of Brentwood