



16th February, 2021

BISHOP STEPHEN'S PASTORAL LETTER FOR LENT

My Dear People,

REPENT AND BELIEVE IN THE GOSPEL!

A few weeks ago, on the first Sunday in Ordinary Time, following as we are this Liturgical Year the gospel of Saint Mark, we heard the story of the Baptism of Jesus. Jesus was baptised in the River Jordan by John, and when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descending upon him. The Gospel text speaks of a voice coming from heaven saying: '*You are my Beloved Son; with you I am well pleased!*'.

Immediately afterwards, Jesus was driven into the desert by the Spirit of God and was tempted for 40 days by Satan, and the angels ministered to him. This 40-day period of course marks out for us symbolically the Christian Season of Lent. During which, from Ash Wednesday onwards, we will try to follow Jesus more closely - eventually to the Cross.

After his desert experience, Saint Mark tells us the first words Jesus utters in the Gospel, these are: "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel". So, the first words uttered by Jesus indicate that the first intention of his public ministry is to call the people to repentance. Of course, repentance implies a change in direction, a change of heart. So, by this change of heart, this *metanoia*, his people would begin to recognise the signs of the kingdom in their lives, in their communities and in their families.

Lent is our season of repentance which begins on Ash Wednesday. We are reminded by the Lord to fast, to pray, and to do penance. The call to do penance is not only because the Lord asks us to deny ourselves, but that by doing so, we can dislodge many of the attitudes and practices in our daily lives that can become obstacles, preventing us from seeing the signs of the kingdom among us. By the end of Lent then, we may be able, like the Centurion at the foot of the Cross, to look on Jesus crucified, and see him as the Son of God, who is our Saviour.

Saint Mark's Gospel beautifully prepares us for Easter, leading as it does from that Baptism of Jesus, through the events of his public ministry to his Passion, Suffering and Death on the Cross. And as part of our response to the Jesus we encounter there we are called to follow him, to serve him, to love him and to spend more time with him in prayer.

On Ash Wednesday this year we will regrettably still be in 'lockdown'. This past year has been a trying and distressing time for all of us. Despite the difficulties though, most of us have been trying to follow the Lord in our own way - especially during those periods when we have been unable to frequent our churches for Mass, for Confession, for adoration and for prayer. Many among us also have died this year, leaving a big hole in many a grieving family. Many among us have been sick. And many have become lonely and depressed. Our elderly, and particularly those in care homes, have often been cut off from the love of their families. Our children and young people have been out of school for long periods and have missed out on many of those social helps that enable them to develop and mature. Many of those who are parents or carers have struggled trying to juggle work with childcare and home schooling. But please God, at last with the vaccination rollout programme increasing day by day we will once again be able to experience some of the freedoms which we took for granted and which we have been deprived of for much of this past year.

So, we are called to 'choose life' at the beginning of this Lent - and for followers of Christ, this involves following our Lord more closely.

This year on Ash Wednesday, 17th February (this Wednesday) we will be unable to receive our ashes, as a sign of a call to repentance, as we usually do. From our Diocesan website (www.dunkelddiocese.co.uk) you will be able to download a small prayer service which can be used at home to bless and impose ashes (or some other similar sign like cinders or soil) on the heads of your family members. This is far from the Sprinkling of Ashes at Mass we normally experience but is a convenient way for all of us to mark the beginning of this Lenten Season of penance and prayer. In addition, you will be able to download a short Service of Stations of the Cross from the same source which will help you to pray until our churches open once again.

Additionally, may I also invite you, dear brothers and sisters, to meditate in your own homes on the Gospel of Saint Mark - perhaps even a few verses each day. The Gospel is short and can easily be covered over the period of Lent. You could also pray the Stations of the Cross or the Holy Rosary as I have already said. And for those who can receive the internet, I also invite you to join one of the many daily Lenten Masses streaming from so many parishes and dioceses. The daily livestream Mass from our own Saint Joseph's convent chapel in Dundee is relayed on the Diocesan YouTube channel at 10 a.m. on weekdays and 10.30 a.m. on Sundays (www.dunkelddiocese.co.uk). This is a positive way of using the power of the Internet for the purposes of evangelisation - of bringing Christ and his Gospel into our homes. Even when the lockdown is over, this daily livestreamed Mass from Lawside will, whenever possible, continue to be celebrated for the benefit of the sick and housebound.

My dear people I look forward to the day when, very soon, our churches will once again be open and we shall be able to be together again in our parishes and re-join the full liturgical life of the Church, living our Catholic faith as fully as we possibly can.

Towards the end of Lent, there will also be the opportunity afforded us once again, by the Apostolic Penitentiary in Rome, for the celebration of a Penitential Service with General Absolution so that as many of us as possible, in our straightened circumstances, can celebrate Easter fully prepared.

I have no crystal ball, of course, but perhaps by Easter we will be able to gather in larger numbers for Mass, and, unlike last year when we missed completely our public celebration of Holy Week and Easter, we shall be able to celebrate the Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ as fully as possible.

With every blessing to you and all your families.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "+ Stephen Robson". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the left of the printed name below it.

+ Stephen Robson
Bishop of Dunkeld.