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Advent 2022 Pastoral letter

Dear friends,

With the coming of Advent, we turn our minds back 2000 years and contemplate the forthcoming celebration of the birth of a child, the Son of God, at a particular place, at a particular time in history. It was the coming of a saviour that had been foretold and anticipated for centuries by the People of Israel.

The historical nature of this event is of paramount importance to us. Unlike other religions, we believe that God, in time, became one of us by assuming flesh and blood. It is often noted that people of other faiths believe very similar things to us as Catholics. This is true and good. Many of the teachings of the great religions speak to us of our human condition and how we should live together in peace and love our neighbour. In this respect it is a powerful witness of people of faith and goodwill to find common ground and work together. In fact, this already happens and should be applauded.

Where we differ though, is not so much in the teachings but in the very identity of our teacher, Jesus Christ. Not just a teacher or wise sage but God Himself in the person of His Son. If this is true, which of course we believe it is, then this moment in history is the moment against which everything else in history must be interpreted, understood and judged. Christ is the keystone of the edifice of human history and without Him all of the wisest teachings of man throughout history amount to so much rubble with nothing to hold them together. As the Holy Father reminds us, it is the encounter with the person of Christ that transforms our lives.

But we don't simply look back 2000 years in Advent. Christ has died on the Cross and has risen from the dead. He has sent us the Holy Spirit. So, He is with us now: through the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, He is present in the most perfect way. But he is also present in creation for it was "through Him all things were made". This might give us pause for thought in our relationship with the environment. He is present through the beauty of art, music, literature, things in which we need to invest time in order for His beauty to permeate our toughened skin. And He is present in the poor, the sick, the disadvantaged. As we all know, although the poor are always with us, those who are struggling financially are rising by the day. Perhaps it is someone sat beside you, but how would you know? Being aware of the needs of our neighbour needs the eyes of the heart to be open. Finding ways to support each other will become more important than ever in the coming months/years given the economic forecasts we hear. "I'm all right Jack" can never be the response of a Christian and we never know when it may be our turn to need the support of others.

So, Christ is with us now, not just in the past or an anticipated future coming. Yet, although Christ is risen and present among us, we declare at mass “Christ will come again”. For Christians life has a purpose. There is something new under the sun – our hope and our faith made real by the love we share. We hear talk today of our postmodernism world and outlook. This is a view that admits of no ultimate rhyme or reason to life other than the one we give it. I am the author of my own purpose and identity. Apart from being breath-takingly barren and self-orientated as a concept of the human condition, it starves the soul of the oxygen it needs to breathe, it draws in the horizon to the limits of my tiny imagination and it hears only the mechanics of a world grinding away to no particular end or purpose.

In the midst of such pointless darkness a light has shone. Advent is a time to prepare for a joy beyond anything we can imagine, a brightness we can only ever glimpse given its intensity. Our calling is to reflect that joy and light into our world through the things we do, the things we say and the way we are. We don’t achieve this by finger-wagging, sitting in judgement on others or by retreating from the world which has a will of its own. We do it by allowing ourselves to be infused and enthused by Jesus, who was born in a stable in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, is with us today at every turn, and whom we await with joyful hope at the end of time.

May you have a blessed Advent.
1st Sunday of Advent 2022

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul" with a small cross or plus sign to the left of the first letter.