

**PASTORAL MESSAGE TO THE CLERGY, RELIGIOUS AND LAY FAITHFUL DIOCESE OF
LEEDS, LAETARE SUNDAY, THE 4TH SUNDAY OF LENT, MARCH 2020**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am sure that you, like me, will be troubled by the threat to human life resulting from the Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic. We will be unsettled too by the unprecedented measures which all of us have a duty to undertake to contain and stop this threat.

Yet the Church's liturgy today, 'Laetare' Sunday, tells us to rejoice! The entrance antiphon for today's Mass invites us: "Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning." (Is 66: 10)

We might think, what a strange sentiment for us to express at this moment in time, given that so great a number of people worldwide are experiencing anxiety, and many are suffering and dying. How can we rejoice when the normal locations and familiar occasions for working together, for meeting one another, and for socialising with others are now places and moments which present potential harm to our health and well-being?

For the first time also, in living memory, the public celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass has been suspended in Jerusalem, in Rome, in our country and, indeed, in many other nations. In witnessing these events, it can seem that a time of darkness and isolation is about to overshadow and oppress us. Why then should we rejoice?

Today's Gospel tells us why. The Lord Jesus heals a man blind from birth. The blind man is taken out of his darkness and the social isolation he endured begging on the streets. Now he is able to see not just the natural light but discovers the supernatural light of faith. Jesus reveals himself as the "light of the world" (John 8:12); he offers a way out of darkness and the isolation it can bring.

The reason that we rejoice as Christians, even in times of great anxiety and suffering, even when we "walk in the valley of darkness" (Psalm 22(23):4), is the faith, hope and love which has been revealed and given to us in Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

In the passion and death of Christ, anxiety, suffering and death have been overcome; this is our faith. In the resurrection and ascension of Christ, darkness has been banished; this is our hope. In the promise of Christ to send and give us the Holy Spirit to be with us forever, we know that we are never alone; this is the love which unites us with him and together as one.

At this time though, there is much fear and anxiousness in our world. There is also much generosity and dedication being shown, particularly by those caring in different ways for the sick. The serious threat to people's health and the social challenges which we face now are one of those moments in time which can bring out both the best and the worst of human nature. The acts of kindness, generosity and self-sacrifice of a great many people can, sadly, be mirrored by the lack of concern, meanness and selfishness of others.

The light given to us in the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ reveals to us not just the best of human nature; it heals, restores and renews in us the fullness of our human nature. The Letter to the Ephesians tells us about the consequences of this: "You were darkness once, but now you are light in the Lord; be like children of light, for the effects of the light are seen in complete goodness and right living and truth".

How do we express that goodness, right living and truth, if not in the care, concern and love we show to others, particularly those who are most vulnerable and isolated. We may think that because of the necessary constrictions on our movements in the weeks ahead that there is little we can do or contribute to help others. But this is not so! As Christians we have much to offer at this time.

Even though we are temporarily unable to come together to participate physically in the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we can still raise our minds, hearts and hands to God and offer him our sacrifice of prayer. Our love for God should lead us to make an Act of Spiritual Communion, to desire his presence within us and thank him for the gift of life he has given to us. Our love for our neighbour should lead us to offer prayers of intercession for the Church, for the world and, particularly at this time, for the sick and those who care for them.

We can demonstrate practical care for each other too. As Cardinal Nichols has said in his recent letter addressed on behalf of all the bishops to the members of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, "There are so many ways in which we are to do this: being attentive to the needs of our neighbour, especially the elderly and vulnerable; contributing to our local food banks; volunteering for charitable initiatives and organisations; simply keeping in touch by all the means open to us".

The light of Christ enables us to see as God would have us see. So today, on this Laetare Sunday, united as members of the one Body of Christ, let us rejoice in the light of faith which has been given to us. Let us place our hope in the power of the Lord to heal, restore and renew all things, and let our love be made manifest in our prayer and in our goodness to those around us.

Through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Unfailing Help, may the Lord

Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, bless you and your family, 'guide you along the right path' and 'give you comfort' now and in the time ahead.

◀ **Marcus Stock Bishop of Leeds**

Given at Leeds on the 19th March 2020, the Solemnity of St Joseph, and appointed to be read at the celebrations of Mass to be live-streamed from churches, published on the diocesan and parish websites, and made available in print in all churches, chapels and religious communities of the Diocese on the 4th Sunday of Lent, 2020.