



**THE MOST REVEREND PETER SMITH L.L.B., J.C.D., K.C.\*H.S.,  
ARCHBISHOP OF SOUTHWARK,  
ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE, 150 ST. GEORGE'S ROAD, SOUTHWARK, LONDON, SE1 6HX**

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Pastoral Letter to be read  
on the Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time  
Sunday, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Next Wednesday we begin the season of Lent; an opportunity the Church gives us every year for conversion and renewal - conversion of mind, heart and action so that we can better fulfil the two great commandments: *"You must love the Lord your God with your whole heart, mind and strength... You must love your neighbour as yourself."* (Mk 12:30-31) It is a time for us to rediscover the joy of the Gospel and to be *"set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness."* (Evangelii Gaudium 1) In this year's Lenten message to the Church throughout the world, Pope Francis prays that, *"...this Lenten season may find the whole Church ready to bear witness, to all those who live in material, moral and spiritual destitution, the Gospel message of the merciful love of God our Father, who is ready to embrace everyone in Christ. We can do this to the extent that we imitate Christ who became poor and enriched us by his poverty. Lent is a fitting time for self-denial; we would do well to ask ourselves what we can give up in order to help and enrich others by our poverty. Let us not forget that real poverty hurts: no self-denial is real without this dimension of penance. I distrust a charity that costs nothing and does not hurt."*

Lent is a season of prayer, fasting and practical concern for those in need. It offers all of us an opportunity to prepare for Easter by a serious discernment about our lives, with particular attention to the word of God which enlightens the daily journey of all who believe. So our particular focus in Lent must be first of all on God, not ourselves. Secondly it must be on our neighbour who is in need, because in that neighbour we are called to look with compassion on the face of the suffering Christ and try and alleviate his suffering.

So, we might fruitfully spend our Lent by reading the gospels and facing the fundamental challenges which Jesus puts before us. Then we might ask ourselves some challenging questions. Does my life reflect an evident commitment to the exhortation given to us on Ash Wednesday to "turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel"? Does my love and compassion truly embrace the poorest and the most needy, or am I selective in giving of myself, and the riches God has given to me, only to those whom I know and like? Do I really pursue the path of reconciliation, or do I allow prejudice and bigotry to promote the rejection and rubbishing of those whom I dislike? Do I give of my time and talents to help build up my local community, to welcome the stranger and those in need?

Our response to these questions must be rooted in our love for the person of Jesus Christ, and in his command to each one of us that we must love one another as he has first loved us. The season of Lent is given to us so that we can open our hearts once again to God and to each other with renewed generosity and compassion. But we can't do that solely through our own efforts. We can only respond fruitfully with the help of the Holy Spirit. As Pope Francis said in his homily to the newly

appointed Cardinals last Sunday in Rome: “... we are called to listen to the Holy Spirit who enlivens and guides the Church. By his creative and renewing power, the Spirit always sustains the hope of God’s People as we make our pilgrim way through history.” He went on to say that “... whilst we tend to be so selfish and proud... the Holy Spirit is able to purify, transform and shape us day by day. To make the effort to be converted, to experience a heartfelt conversion: this is something that all of us – especially you Cardinals and myself – must do.”

Listening to those words made me pause and reflect on the goodness of God and how fortunate most of us are. We have so much to thank God for. Most of us have homes and jobs and families, good friends and supportive relationships. Many of us have more than sufficient to meet our material and spiritual needs. Yet I am also very conscious that there are people both here in our own country and abroad who are not so fortunate. I am aware that there are many people who are vulnerable, defenceless and poor. For these, the beauty of life and the joy of living are obscured by suffering, by fear, and by great need, both material and spiritual. The danger in Lent is that we can focus in the wrong way on ourselves and the particular ways we choose to live out this penitential Season. The purpose of Lent is to open our hearts to the life-giving Word of God who, in quiet prayer and reflection, will reveal to us the truth about ourselves, our motives, and our priorities in life. All that we do in Lent, our prayer, our fasting and our almsgiving are means to this end – not ends in themselves. The end and purpose of Lent is to allow God’s grace to change us so that we truly “repent and believe the Good News”; so that we become ever more aware that “the Kingdom of God is close at hand” and confidently live out and proclaim that Gospel to the people of our times.

In May this year we shall be gathering in the three areas of the Diocese to reflect on Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, “Evangelii Gaudium”. These will be gatherings of the clergy, religious and laity to begin to discern how we respond to Pope Francis’ call for the conversion and renewal of the whole Church, and how better to proclaim the Gospel with confidence to those who have yet to hear it. I encourage you to come to these gatherings, and to make this Lent a real preparation for these meetings so that we can all respond generously to the challenge which Pope Francis has given us.

Wishing you every blessing for Lent  
and an assurance of my prayers for you all,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'P. + Peter', written in a cursive style.

Archbishop of Southwark

Given at Southwark, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2014