



**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
TEL: 020 7928 2495 FAX: 020 7928 7833**

**Pastoral Letter to be read
on the First Sunday of Advent 2014
Sunday, 30th November 2014**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

A week or two ago, I got up as usual early in the morning, drew back the curtains and contemplated the start of another new day. What I saw from my window hardly filled me with enthusiasm. The prospect was decidedly gloomy. It was still dark, but in the light of the streetlamp outside I could see that a steady and persistent rain was falling. The trees in St. George's Road were almost bare, and the pavements and gutters were covered with a scattering of sodden leaves. A solitary pigeon was perched on the roof of one of the houses opposite me, looking decidedly bedraggled and lacking in energy and enthusiasm! As I looked out on the dismal scene it reminded me of the words of the Psalmist, "I lie awake and I moan, like some lonely bird on a roof", and of the words of Isaiah in the first reading of today's Mass: "We have all withered like leaves and our sins blew us away like the wind." The scene I looked out on reflected my inner mood. I felt a distinct lack of joy at the prospect of the coming day, a reluctance to get started on what would be a long day full of meetings which I was not particularly looking forward to. Then I remembered the words of another Psalm which summed up and expressed exactly how I felt: "My spirit fails; my heart is numb within me."

Thank God not every day is like that! Thank God there are days when we get up and can't wait to get started. On those days life seems good and we begin them with a sense of eagerness and enthusiasm. We have a sense of joyful anticipation, ready and willing to face the new day and whatever it may bring. Providentially one of the Psalms at Morning Prayer that morning was Psalm 50, and one verse in particular put into words my hope for the day: "A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, nor deprive me of your Holy Spirit. Give me again the joy of your help; with a spirit of fervour sustain me." And he did!

As with the ordinary days of the week, so it can be when we face the start of the Church's new year, the season of Advent. In Advent we are encouraged to make a fresh start on our journey of faith. This journey has two stages: the long term destination is the second coming of Christ at the end of time when all things will be made new. The more immediate destination is the celebration of Christ's first coming into the world at Christmas. It is perhaps easier to face the shorter journey towards Christmas rather than the one which still seems so very far away.

We may approach this journey with a sense of lethargy and reluctance, or with joy and enthusiasm, depending on our particular circumstances and frame of mind. If, today, we find ourselves rather reluctant, the liturgy offers us a sense of real hope and encouragement. We begin to capture the spirit of this season when we hear and make our own the words of the response to the Responsorial Psalm: “God of hosts, bring us back; let your face shine on us and we shall be saved.” To take the path towards the house of our heavenly Father is to make the journey towards our ultimate end – a full sharing in the life and love of God for eternity – the very reason for which God created us. He says to each one of us ‘You are precious in my sight, and I love you,’ and that should fill us with great hope and consolation. His love for us is revealed clearly and specifically in the person of Jesus Christ whose birth we shall commemorate at Christmas. The Church asks us to prepare for the celebration of this great feast by entering fully into the spirit of Advent, and to do so with energy and enthusiasm. It is the spirit of renewed hope and expectancy as we wait, once again, for the coming of the Saviour into our hearts and minds through the power of the Holy Spirit.

But we can only hold fast to Christ if we are fully awake and alert to his voice in the scriptures, in our daily prayer, and when we meet him in the celebration of the sacraments. We also meet him too in the weak, the poor, the sick and the suffering, and all those in need. These are ‘God’s little people’ for whom we, like Christ himself, must have a special care and concern.

To make this journey of faith and to support each other along the way is not easy. We need to be awake and alert, as Jesus commands us in today’s Gospel. We need energy and enthusiasm. We need the support and encouragement of each other. And at the end of the day, we can only make the journey through the power of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise we will not have the resources to go on, and we will want to stop where we are, or even worse, turn back to the old and familiar places which we have long left behind. So I ask you all to heed the invitation of Pope Francis to every member of the Church throughout the world: *“I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think this invitation is not meant for him or her, since ‘no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord’. The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realise he is already there, waiting for us with open arms.”* (Evangelii Gaudium 3.)

I pray that this Advent we may all open our hearts to that presence of the Holy Spirit, the “Lord and Giver of Life” whom we received in Baptism and Confirmation. It is the Holy Spirit who will empower us and give us strength for the journey, however difficult and however dark that journey may sometimes seem. It is the Holy Spirit who will enable us to respond to the loving and urgent invitation of Mary, Mother of the Lord: “Do whatever he asks of you.” [Jn. 2:5]

With an assurance of my prayers and blessing for you all,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter' with a cross symbol to the left.

Archbishop of Southwark

Given at Southwark 21st November, 2014.