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**Pastoral Letter to be read
on the First Sunday of Advent 2016
Sunday 27th November 2016**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As I write this Pastoral Letter to you, I am looking out of my window at a very gloomy scene. It's growing dark and the street lamps are struggling to shine through the rain and the mist which has become a feature of these last few days of November. That rather depressing scene is reflected in the news headlines of the economic and political uncertainty following the Referendum on "Brexit" back in June in our own country, the divisive Presidential election in America, and the ongoing tragedy of the war in Syria which has resulted in so many deaths, and the refugee crisis brought about by the huge numbers of displaced people seeking asylum in Europe. In our own country there is growing concern about the apparent lack of care for the elderly in some of our hospitals and care homes, and now we're told, even in their own homes. We hear too of the persecution of Christians and other minority groups in the Middle East and in some other countries – the list could go on!

How, then, do we reconcile all this with the celebration of the season of Advent which we begin today – a season which the Church presents to us as one of joyful expectation as we prepare to celebrate the Incarnation, the coming into the world of God in the person of Jesus Christ, our Saviour? Has the God of unconditional love, mercy and compassion abandoned us? In my experience of visiting parishes and schools in the Archdiocese, the answer to that is, "Certainly not." I have found it so encouraging and uplifting to find vibrant parish communities and first class schools which live out the Gospel in many different ways – in the development of evangelisation teams, "Stewardship" groups, prayer groups, and outreach to the poor and homeless by fulfilling the corporal and spiritual works of mercy in their respective communities amongst many other good works. I have met so many good and faithful members of the laity, clergy, and religious both female and male, all of whom are witnessing to the Gospel through the lives they live, which I find so heartening in these difficult times. And just last week, the "Children in Need" appeal raised £47 million pounds from ordinary people in this country, from all faiths and none, despite the uncertain times we live in.

Nonetheless, Advent is a fruitful time for us to examine the depth and strength of our faith in God and in his providence and to ask for God's grace and help to remain faithful disciples. In the person of Jesus Christ, whose birth we will celebrate at Christmas, we see made visible the God we cannot see; the God who asks to be invited into our innermost lives in order to share his love with us. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice, I will come in to him..." But the door to our hearts can only be opened from the inside, and Christ will not force his way in – he waits with great longing and patience for us to invite him to come in. He longs to take away our fears and anxieties and convince us of his unconditional love for each one of us – a love which is steadfast and enduring and which will never fail whatever the storms of life bring.

In today's short gospel passage, Jesus urges his disciples to "stay awake" because he doesn't want to find us asleep when he comes knocking at the door. In this context, to be asleep signifies self-centredness, selfishness and spiritual exhaustion; a turning in on ourselves and a turning away from any concern for the needs of others. On the other hand, to be awake means to live with a firm and lively faith, and to live a life of outgoing love, compassion and mercy towards our neighbour. It means to trust in God's presence and providence, alert and attentive to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit who wants to transform our lives and fill us with the love of God. That "conversion of heart" is both spiritual and moral, and allows the Spirit to draw us closer to Christ in a deeper personal relationship through prayer and the celebration of the sacraments, in particular the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

As we grow in the love of God, we inevitably grow in our love for our neighbour. Jesus fully identified himself and his mission with those in need: the poor, the hungry and thirsty, the oppressed, and the outcasts. Whatever their circumstances, they need to be loved, valued and respected because they are created in the image and likeness of God. These are our brothers and sisters in Christ, these are our neighbours, these are the ones in whom we meet the suffering Christ. He told us that the poor will always be with us and in the present circumstances there is certainly no lack of them in the world, in our parishes and neighbourhoods. Whilst these are truly our neighbours, we are only truly his disciples if we do what he asks of us, because on that we shall be judged on the last day. "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you; or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome; naked and clothe you; sick and in prison and go to see you? And the King will answer, 'I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.'"

We can't hope to fulfil the challenge Christ puts before us every day unless we are firmly rooted in the spiritual life, in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Only then will we be able to listen and respond to the word of God speaking deep in our hearts. Only then will we recognise the prompting of the Holy Spirit and be able to discern what the Spirit is asking of us in our own lives and as members of the local Church. So I commend to you the words of St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans which we heard this morning: "You know the time has come: you must wake up now... The night is almost over, it will be daylight soon – let us give up all things we prefer to do under cover of the dark; let us arm ourselves and appear in the light. Let us live decently as people do in the daytime."

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



Archbishop of Southwark

Given at Southwark, 21st November, 2016, Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.