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**Pastoral Letter to be read  
on the First Sunday of Advent 2017  
Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2017**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today we begin a new liturgical year with the season of Advent which offers us a real sense of hope, joy and encouragement as we continue our journey of faith to celebrate the Incarnation on Christmas Day. In this short season, the liturgy encourages us to undergo a change of heart and make a new and determined effort to fulfil our responsibilities as disciples of Christ to live fully the two great commandments, to love God with our whole heart and soul, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. The prominent theme of Advent is the call to conversion and renewal, as we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ at Christmas, and look forward in hope and joyful expectation to his second coming at the end of time. It gives us an opportunity to stand back a little from our busy and often hectic lives, to reflect on where we stand with God our Saviour.

We begin to capture the spirit of Advent when we hear and respond to the words of the Psalmist: "I rejoiced when I heard them say, let us go to God's house." To make our journey towards the house of our heavenly Father is to make the journey towards our ultimate end – the very reason for which God created us, and whose unconditional love, mercy and compassion for every human being we discover anew each day, if we have ears to hear and eyes to see.

Advent is a "wake up" call, expressed very well by Saint Paul in his Letter to the Romans: "You know the time has come: you must wake up now: our salvation is even nearer now than it was when we were converted. The night is almost over, it will be daylight soon – let us give up all the things we prefer to do under cover of the dark; let us arm ourselves and appear in the light." And in today's gospel reading we hear Jesus too calling us to "Stay awake, because you do not know the day when your master is coming."

In fact Christ, the light of the world, stands at the door of our hearts every day. As Saint Ambrose put it in one of his sermons, "Let your door be open to him when he comes, open your soul, throw open your inmost mind... Blessed therefore, is that man at whose door Christ knocks. Our door is faith, which if strong, fortifies the whole house. It is through this door that Christ comes in." That door can only be opened from inside and he waits patiently for us to open it and welcome him in. But too often we are so taken up with our daily cares and concerns that we either fail to hear the knock, or are simply too busy to answer it. We need to make time to listen and respond to that gentle knocking.

Wherever we are in our spiritual journey, our awareness, our belief that God loves us unconditionally, should fill us with joy, hope and consolation. That love has been revealed in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ whose birth we will celebrate again at Christmas. The spirit of Advent is the spirit of renewed hope and expectancy as we long for the coming of the Saviour into our hearts and minds – not just at Christmas, but every day. Each day we are called to become more and more like the person of Jesus Christ and model our lives on him. Then we too, in some small way, will be able to reveal to the world something of the unconditional love of God, which he offers as pure gift to everyone without exception.

But we will only be able to hold fast to Christ if we are fully awake and alert to his voice: in the scriptures, in our prayer, and when we meet him in the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We meet him too especially in the weak, the poor, the sick and the suffering. These are ‘God’s little people’ for whom we, like Christ himself, must have a special care and concern. In the words of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, we must become “a poor Church for the poor.” We need eyes to see the needy and suffering Christ in those around us, those amongst whom we live and work. We need hearts open to the Holy Spirit who, if we ask, will fill them with the fire of God’s love. And we need the support and encouragement of each other because we journey not simply as individuals but as disciples of Christ who are members of God’s family, the community of faith.

So my prayer this Advent is that we will take the time to open our hearts to the gift of the Holy Spirit, asking him to deepen our faith, confirm our hope in God’s promises, and help us to be more generous in our love for God and one another, especially the poor, the sick, the isolated and the suffering in our midst. In these we meet the suffering Christ, and it is in them that we truly serve him who came not to be served but to serve. “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.”

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



Archbishop of Southwark

Given at Southwark, 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2017,  
Solemnity of Christ the King.