

Pastoral Letter

To be read and made available on Sunday 5th March 2006
The First Sunday of Lent.

My dear people,

As we embark once more on the season of Lent, it is good to remind ourselves that this holy time should always be understood as *preparation* for the celebration of Holy Week and of Easter. The season of Lent is not 'free standing': without the direct relationship to the Easter Triduum it has no focus and no meaning. Lent has always been a time of penance but any penitential exercise we adopt should be undertaken as a *personal* preparation for the celebration of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection. At the heart of that is Good Friday: the day when Our Lord died on the cross. I would like, therefore, to offer some reflections on the cross for meditation during this season of Lent.

The cross, and more specifically, the crucifix, is the fundamental icon of our Christian faith. That is why it is important that the crucifix should be displayed prominently and unashamedly in all Catholic Churches and institutions. If we, as Christians, lose sight of the cross then we lose our bearings. The cross reveals God's love for us and I want to suggest that it also reveals how we may reciprocate that love. It is a great and profound paradox of our faith that this ugly and cruel event discloses the beauty of God more fully and more profoundly than any other image or symbol.

The crucifixion of Jesus was an integral part of the story of God becoming man. It could not have been otherwise. Were it not for the crucifixion of Jesus, the incarnation of the Son of God would not have achieved its purpose. In his passion, Jesus reached into the depths of sickness and disorder, of violence and of death itself. He reached us all, whatever our condition: the cross discloses this and in so doing discloses the depth and the beauty of God's love for us.

It is important to bear this in mind when we are perplexed and troubled by suffering in our own lives or suffering in the world in which we live. We cannot and must not get used to the horror of sufferings brought about by war, terrorism, by poverty and disease. The question "why?" will never go away. The same question can press upon us in our personal lives when we feel overburdened by sickness or distress.

Those who do not believe in God will sometimes point to innocent suffering as a reason for their unbelief. From the vantage point of unbelief there can never be any answer to the question "why?" And the vantage point of faith does not provide us with any easy answers. It does however profoundly affect the way in which we perceive the whole mystery of evil.

Through his suffering and death Jesus embraced human nature in every aspect except sin. He made possible a union between God and humanity that could never have been established in any other way. We have become sons and daughters of God, something that is central to the teaching of Apostle Paul. Another way of expressing the union between God and humanity is that of friendship. This is beautifully expressed in St. John's Gospel through the words of Jesus to his disciples "No longer do I call you servants. Rather I call you friends" For us today, the vital point is that it is precisely Christ's death on the cross that opens up the possibility of men and women being 'friends of God'. The cross, which reveals the depth and beauty of God's love, invites us to friendship with him but does not impose it. It shows how costly is God's love for us and how costly it is to respond to that love.

The cross confronts us with a choice; it engages us at the level of our deepest freedom. If we choose to say 'Yes' to Christ's invitation, we know that the cross will be planted securely in our lives. There is no alternative route.

So it is that a truly human and, therefore, a truly moral life will be marked by patience and suffering which will certainly bear great fruit; that fruit will be not only personal friendship with God but also true love and friendship within the human community. It is in that profound perspective that we should consider the significance of doing penance in Lent. It is a token or a sign of our willingness to suffer with Christ and so seal our friendship with him.

But I want to suggest that these reflections should shape the whole way in which we think about our lives and about the suffering of the human race. While we should do all in our power to establish peace and well being in our

world and in our own lives, the cross enables us to embrace in faith the evil that is visited upon us and which we are powerless to overcome. In that perspective it may be helpful to see the season of Lent as a microcosm of our whole lives. In the Psalms and in Christian Prayer we find much wisdom that can enable us to engage with suffering in a spirit of hope. Psalm 23 says “though I walk in the valley of darkness, no evil will I fear” and in the Hail Holy Queen, a prayer of vibrant trust in the intercession of Our Lady, there is nothing self pitying about calling our life a “valley of tears”. Suffering has to be seen in the light of the resurrection, in the light of the Risen Lord who still bears the wounds of his passion. When we rise in him, we too will bear our wounds and finally understand the wisdom of the Cross as it has touched our own lives

For now, and for this Lent let us simply contemplate the cross and allow its wisdom to speak to us. This we can do by making the Stations of the Cross, by saying the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary or simply kneeling in silence before the crucifix. Whatever prayers or devotions we use, and whatever we do for Lent, let this be a time of growing in the wisdom of the cross, and a time of deepening our personal love for Jesus who died for us out of love that we cannot even begin to imagine. Let it be a time of saying “yes” to his invitation to friendship and for embracing courageously all that that friendship may demand of us. Finally, let it be a time of prayer for justice and peace in the world, a prayer we make in the light of our faith in the coming Kingdom of God, the seeds of which are already being sown especially in those places of the world which are so tragically marked by the sign of the Cross.

Yours devotedly in Christ

+Kevin

Archbishop of Southwark

Given at St. George's Cathedral, Southwark

on 2nd February 2006

The Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord