

**ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE
150 ST. GEORGE'S ROAD
SOUTHWARK
LONDON SE1 6HX**

**Pastoral Letter
for the First Sunday of Advent
2nd December 2007**

My Dear People,

The season of Advent which is the start of the Church's year, always provides us with a new beginning and it engenders in us a spirit of hope. Faith in the future and hope for new beginnings are built into the liturgy of Advent and we should allow the liturgy to shape our thinking and our prayer. The Gospel that we have heard today reflects the combination of apprehension and hope that characterise the way we typically look to the future. They both figure in our consciousness whether we are young or old and whatever our situation in life. Both the things we fear and the things we hope for will change over the years. But the two emotions remain with us always. They are part of life and part of the journey of faith.

The reading from the prophecy of Isaiah is a confident proclamation of what God will do in the future. This message is addressed to human anxiety and tells us that the future is in God's hands: our looking forward must be focussed on God's promises and God's action. This theme recurs in the writings of the prophets and is one that we should make our own. The promises may be difficult to trust and the hope may seem vain. But they are part of the Word of God. We are told:

"Nation will not lift sword against nation,
there will be no more training for war."

We must find it in our hearts to embrace that hope despite all the terrible wars and conflicts that fill our news bulletins and breed fear for the future.

In our own lives too, we need to believe that the Lord will act. We can recall the powerful prophecy of Ezekiel:

"I shall pour clean water over you... I shall give you a new heart,
and put a new spirit in you." (Ezekiel 36, 25 – 26)

It may be that you have experienced some fulfilment of that promise in your own life, but in any event, these words must certainly guide us as we engage with the troubles and conflicts that life brings.

God's promises must also shape our hearts and minds as we look to the future of the Church and of the Diocese. As we seek to develop a fresh vision for the future our thoughts must not be shaped by our fears. Those fears may not disappear but they need to be seen in the larger perspective of God's promises: the Lord is coming and he will provide. What is asked of us is simply that we prepare the way of the Lord.

Advent is precisely a time of preparation and particularly of inward preparation for the coming of the Lord. We prepare to celebrate fittingly the birth into the world of the Son of God. St Paul calls us to this inner conversion when he says:

“The night is almost over, it will be daylight soon”

and he calls us to live as children of the light and not children of darkness.

Advent is also a short season and in our culture it can get lost in the commercialisation of Christmas. Celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation helps us to stay in touch with the meaning of Advent: it is an opportunity to bring our lives before God directly and seek forgiveness and a new start. This Advent we are also being encouraged to reach out to those who no longer practise their Catholic faith. We should not be afraid to share our faith and hope with others and it may be that we know people who need a word of encouragement from us in order to take the first steps back to the Church.

Finally let us all pray for one another in the Church and in the Diocese as we face the future together. The Lord is coming so let us remain awake and vigilant. That is the spirit in which we will truly be able to understand and experience the mystery of Christmas.

With my blessing and prayers to you all,

Yours sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kevin". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.

Archbishop of Southwark

Given in Southwark
on 1st November 2007
The Solemnity of All Saints