



Archbishop's House
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Pastoral Letter

**to be read or made available on the 4th Sunday of the Year, 1st February 2009,
the day before the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord**

My dear people,

On Monday, we will celebrate the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, and I would like to draw on some of the wisdom of that Feast in order to reflect on our Christian lives as we gather for our Sunday worship.

In the writings of the prophet Malachi, God's action in our world is said to be like a refiner's fire or a fuller's alkali. What he means by this is that God tries and tests us in order to change us and in order to purify us. This is how God deals with his people and it is a recurring theme in the scriptures. Moreover, it is a lesson we learn not only from the bible but also from the whole Christian tradition and especially from the lives of the saints. This wisdom should help us to understand and interpret the negative and difficult things that happen to us whether as individuals or as a society. The evil and suffering that casts such a shadow on our world is not something that we should avoid or try not to think about. Rather we need to confront and engage with evil and suffering both as it touches our own lives and the world to which we belong. By positively responding in trust to what God asks of us through the troubles of life, we allow God to remake us in his own image and build his Kingdom in our world.

Let us consider this more concretely. The current financial crisis raises questions about our attitude to money and to profit. On a personal level, it puts questions to us about what we put our faith in, about where we look in order to ensure our security and prosperity. We must hope and pray not only that the present situation will stabilise but also that we will learn lessons about our attitudes to wealth, possessions, and property. It is always good to remember that, according to the Acts of the Apostles, the first Christian communities held all their goods in common. The monastic movement, with its commitment to poverty and denial of private property, has always been a countersign to the natural tendency to greed and the accumulation of wealth. The Church is a communion of people who participate and share together in God's gifts. The Church should be a sign of a different way of living from the selfish and acquisitive attitudes that we are encouraged, so often, to make our own.

Likewise, the Church should be a sign to the world through our attitude and response to human suffering. I think, for example, of the seemingly intractable conflict in the Holy Land and the never-ending troubles of the people of Africa. It is absolutely right that we should have agencies that seek to relieve suffering. The Church should also be a critical voice in relation to economic and political structures that are marred by corruption. These perpetuate the division

between rich and poor both locally and throughout the world. If we share our goods with those in need, and if we speak up for the poor and weak, then we play our part in bringing into being the “new humanity” that the refining fire of God’s love is seeking to establish.

In embracing suffering but also seeing it as the means by which new life comes into being, we are simply following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ who, though sinless, took to himself the realities of evil and sin so that we might have life. The cross is the symbol of this because it is both the symbol of evil and the sign of hope, hope for the future – for resurrection. It is the sign of hope for a new order, a new life which will be the fruit of God’s purifying action in the world.

The Feast of the Presentation is about acknowledging Christ as Lord and welcoming him into our world. We should make our own the words of Simeon who recognised Jesus as Saviour when Joseph and Mary brought him to the temple. His words perfectly express Christian faith and hope and for that reason have a privileged place in the liturgy of the Church. Simeon was an old man who wanted to see the Lord before he died. When he saw Jesus, he said:

“Now Master, you can let your servant go in peace,
just as you promised;
because my eyes have seen the salvation
which you have prepared for all the nations to see,
a light to enlighten the pagans,
and the glory of your people Israel.”

This Feast should be an inspiration to us. Christ is the light of the world for all people and all nations. What is more, we should be serene and confident in communicating this faith and hope to others. It may be that in more troubled times, people will be more receptive to the Gospel message since it is a message of hope. It is a message that may help people to come to terms with the troubles they experience. We have a message and it falls to us to value it and to share it with others.

At Christmas, we celebrated the fact that Christ came among us as a man. If our lives are painful and testing then that can be the means whereby we embrace more fully the life of our crucified and risen Lord and are empowered to share that life with others.

The person who most effectively communicated the truth of Christ to the nations of the world was St Paul to whom this year is especially dedicated. He was acutely aware of the value of his own sufferings for the communities he served.

So, let us ponder these things as we seek to become more like Christ and to be instruments of his peace in the world.

Yours sincerely in Christ,



+Kevin McDonald
Archbishop of Southwark

Given in Southwark on
Sunday, 11th January 2009,
The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.