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**Pastoral Letter to be read
on the Eighth Sunday of Ordinary time 2019 – Sunday before Ash Wednesday
Sunday, 3rd March 2019**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On Wednesday this week, Ash Wednesday, we shall begin the Season of Lent in preparation for celebrating the great Paschal Mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ at Easter. Experience tells us that there are moments in our lives when we are presented with an opportunity to do something which will be to our advantage if we take it up. That experience is summed up pithily in the old Latin adage, or maxim, "*carpe diem*" which is variously translated as "*seize the day*" or "*seize the moment.*" It's an exhortation to make the most of an opportunity when it comes, and not dither about indecisively because that opportunity may not come again at a favourable time!

The wisdom expressed in that maxim seems to me particularly appropriate as once again we begin our Lenten journey towards Easter. Every year, the season of Lent offers us the opportunity to stand back a little from our daily concerns, and reflect on our lives in the light of the Gospel. As the great philosopher, Socrates said so wisely, "*The un-reflected life is not worth living.*" Yet we all know from experience that in the hectic and frenetic world in which we live today, it's quite difficult to make time to reflect - to reflect on our lives, its meaning and where it is heading. The Church gives us the season of Lent as a time to recall, and to reflect on the meaning of our baptism and the commitment which flows from it. Do I understand and generously accept the responsibilities which arise from being baptised? Does my life mirror the fact that I have been created in the image and likeness of God? Do others see in me, and in the way I relate to others, something of the unconditional love, compassion and mercy of God?

We are called to undertake this reflection during Lent always in the light of the Paschal Mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. It was through that act of unconditional love that Christ won for us the forgiveness of our sins, and the promise of communion and eternal life with the living God, Father, Son and Spirit.

Lent is the season for each of us to enter into a closer union with the person of Christ and to reflect on how we deal with the temptations which afflict us all in different ways. To do that fruitfully we need to be serious about the three traditional helps towards that end, namely, prayer, fasting and almsgiving. But important and vital though these personal efforts are, we need to open our hearts humbly to the life-giving grace and presence of Christ, and ask for his help. This is beautifully depicted in a famous picture by Holman Hunt, entitled the "Light of Christ". In Holman Hunt's picture, Jesus is standing at a cottage door, holding a lantern. The surroundings are dark and gloomy, and the lantern shines on the door which is overgrown with creepers and vines. It looks as if it has not been opened for many a year and can't be opened easily now.

But perhaps the most significant detail in the picture is that there is no handle on the door. Clearly, Christ is bringing his light to shine in the darkened and gloomy dwelling, but he can't do that unless the householder is willing and able to open the door from the inside. The scene is a pictorial representation of the verse in the Book of the Apocalypse in which Christ says: *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If you hear me calling and you open the door, I will come in..."*

The risen Christ is our Light and our Hope, and invites each one of us to follow willingly and generously in his footsteps, because he is the light that no darkness can ever overcome. Each day we are invited to die a little more to the sin and selfishness which marks the life of each one of us, and to witness to the love, compassion and mercy of Jesus Christ. We are invited to enter willingly and generously the narrow gate of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, for that's the way to die to the false self within us, and to grow into new people formed ever more deeply in the image and likeness of Jesus.

In order to do that, Jesus tells us, *"If you want to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me."* The constant temptation is to turn in on ourselves, give way to selfishness, to fear and anxiety, to become pessimistic and cynical. The antidote to these temptations is to be found in prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Prayer, personal and liturgical, takes us out of ourselves and places us firmly in the hands of God. Fasting teaches us to exercise self-control and helps us grow in compassion for the suffering of our world. Both of these lead us to be generous with the gifts God has lavished upon us and give of our bounty to those who struggle each day with grinding poverty and need. Taken together, these traditional Lenten exercises help us to grow as persons, to grow as Disciples of Christ and to bring relief and hope to those who represent the suffering Christ in our own times.

The spirit with which we need to approach this penitential season is also well expressed in Psalm 50:

*"A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence, nor deprive me of your holy spirit...
A humble, contrite heart you will not spurn."*

In other words if we are to make the most of Lent, we need God's help, so we need to ask him each day to rekindle in our hearts the gift of the Holy Spirit, the 'Lord and giver of life' so that our lives will be a true witness to the love, compassion and mercy of God.

Wishing you every blessing for the Season of Lent and for Easter,

And let's pray for each other during this Season of Lent,



Archbishop of Southwark

Given at Southwark, 24th February, 2019