

Pastoral Letter on the Centenary and Future of our Diocese

(To be read at all Masses on 11th/12th February)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This weekend we celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes the principal patron saint of our diocese. We are also beginning our Centenary celebrations marking the establishment of the new diocese of Brentwood by Pope Benedict XV in 1917.

The Diocese of Brentwood began during the First World War and most of us today cannot imagine the enormous pressures and challenges of those times. Yet Pope Francis has called us to reflect on the challenges of our present time: 'The hearts of many people are gripped by fear and desperation... The joy of living frequently fades, lack of respect for others and violence are on the rise, and inequality is increasingly evident. It is a struggle to live and, often, with precious little dignity' (Evangeli Gaudium 52).

Pope Francis speaks of 'today's vast and rapid cultural changes' and it is very clear to me that these changes will continue to accelerate. However my Christian faith also gives me great hope: 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever' (Hebrews 13.8).

In every generation there are choices to be made – in today's Old Testament reading God's people are encouraged to choose life not death. In the gospel Jesus urges his disciples to choose the kingdom of heaven rather than sin. At Lourdes Bernadette had to choose whether to return to the grotto and listen to the Lady or to walk away.

As we make our choices in today's world Pope Francis asks us to read the signs of our times. We are called to an 'evangelical discernment... the approach of a missionary disciple'. In the words of the Holy Father, 'this involves not only recognising and discerning spirits, but also – and this is decisive – choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil' (EG 51).

It is clear to me that we now need to make important choices for our own diocese. Pope Saint John Paul II almost 30 years ago urged dioceses to embrace 'collaboration, dialogue, discernment...and consultation of the lay faithful, women and men'. Pope Francis takes up this challenge and points to a way forward: 'A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will prove illusory ... The important thing is not to walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment.'

As we celebrate our Centenary and seek to move forward I ask all of you to pray for the Catholic life and witness of our diocese and especially to support the Stewards of the Gospel initiative -

1. Be as active and involved as you are able – be 'generous and courageous without inhibitions or fear' (cf EG 33).
2. Please pray for our diocese as it moves into the next hundred years – pray for our parishes, our schools, our communities and our Stewards of the Gospel.
3. Pray for the clergy of our diocese – be grateful for the generosity and sacrifice of our wonderful priests; despite inevitable frailties they bring the real presence of Christ among us.

4. The first disciples lived in uncertain and even chaotic times yet they chose Christ. I invite all young people to consider carefully how God is calling you. Only the good news of Jesus speaks fully of the deepest truths of God and also reaches the depths of our humanity.

5. Please take home and read your copy of *Shaping our Future – Stewards of the Gospel*. Use the prayer on the back page and learn from Saint Bernadette's journey into discipleship – 'I rubbed my eyes thinking I was making a mistake... I knelt down... I tried to make the sign of the cross... After that I was no longer afraid'.

I entrust the future of the diocese to the care of Our Lady of Lourdes who, because she was 'full of grace', knew that nothing is impossible to God.

Yours in Christ and Mary,

+Alan Williams, sm,

Bishop of Brentwood