

**New Year Pastoral Letter of Bishop Alan Williams, sm
on the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God.**

(Read at all Masses on the weekend of the
31st December/1st January)

Dear brothers and sisters,

I hope that the celebration of Christmas and our entering into the New Year bring you God's peace and many blessings.

In today's Gospel Saint Luke tells us how the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem brought astonishment and joy to the shepherds and to all who witnessed the coming of the Infant Saviour. In the midst of this, "Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart".

Today we celebrate the Feast of Mary the Mother of God – a human being just like ourselves but uniquely filled with the grace of God. Mary is our mother but also someone who shows us what Christians can become by the grace of God.

Pope Saint John Paul II called Mary the 'first disciple of the Lord' – the first to believe in the Gospel; Emeritus Pope Benedict calls her 'the great believer'.

Saint Augustine was so astonished at the grace of God revealed in the perfection of Mary's life that he said:

"The blessed Mary certainly did the Father's will, and so it was for her a greater thing to have been Christ's disciple than to have been his mother, and she was more blessed in her discipleship than in her motherhood. Hers was the happiness of first bearing in her womb Him whom she would obey as her Lord."

Mary gives birth to the Redeemer at Bethlehem; at Pentecost she is in the midst of the apostles as the Church comes to birth. When we witness to the Gospel as faithful disciples of Christ we also imitate Mary. In Saint Augustine's words, "By bringing others to birth in the same way, you have it in your power to become mothers of Christ".

If we want to make progress as disciples of the Lord, we can look confidently to Mary, our mother and companion. St Augustine tells us that we should imitate Mary in her discipleship and her motherhood.

Mary gave birth to the Word of God; throughout her life she lived and breathed that same Word – "Blessed are they who hear and do the Word of God" (Luke 11.28). She continues to share this treasure in all ages and amongst all peoples.

Mary, 'the Star of the New Evangelisation', remains the model and inspiration for all of us. Pope Saint John Paul II in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer*, reminded us that evangelisation will always be, "the first task of the Church". Likewise, in *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)* Pope Francis insists that missionary outreach must be at the centre of all the Church's activities.

Next year we celebrate our Centenary as the Diocese of Brentwood. We can look back with great gratitude at the grace of God but we also need to dare to be brothers, sisters and, yes, mothers of Christ in the world in which we live.

We must seek new and creative ways of sharing the great treasure of our Catholic Christian faith in a world hungry for the justice and peace of God's Kingdom. Every parish should now have a Steward of the Gospel and during the past year our Stewards have been praying and undergoing training for the great mission ahead. Like Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church, we are called to be like Christ, think like Christ, feel like Christ and act like Christ in all that we do.

May the Lord give us many blessings in the year ahead – for our families, our parishes, our diocese and our world.

Yours in Christ and Mary,

+*Alan Williams, sm*
Bishop of Brentwood