

**Pastoral Letter of Bishop Alan Williams, sm**  
**For the First Sunday of Advent**

Read at all Masses on the weekend of the 26/27th November 2016

My Dear People,

Last Sunday the Holy Year of Mercy ended and this Sunday we enter into the season of Advent as we prepare for the great Feast of the Incarnation at Christmas.

In visits to parishes, schools and communities throughout the diocese I have been aware of the amazing impact of the Year of Mercy – this “extraordinary moment of grace and spiritual renewal” in the life of the Church – we have much to thank God for.

When Pope Francis summoned us to the Year of Mercy he suggested that we “allow God to surprise us”. Most of our Sunday Gospels through the year have been from the Gospel of St Luke. It is Luke who presents us with the astonishing parables of the Prodigal Son and the Lost Sheep and records the transforming encounter of Jesus with Zaccheus the tax collector.

What will be the legacy of the Year of Mercy? As the Holy Father closed the Holy Door at St Peter's Basilica he encouraged us to ask for the grace of never closing the doors of reconciliation and pardon in our own lives.

Today's Gospel urges us to stay awake and stand ready to welcome Christ into our lives. In the words of the Holy Father we need constantly “to contemplate the mystery of mercy, to gaze even more attentively on mercy”.

We can gaze on Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and in the Word of God. We also see Christ in the poor. In words that continue to shock, our Lord identifies himself with the least of our brothers and sisters –

“I was hungry and you gave me food,

I was thirsty and you gave me drink,

I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

For the last 14 months many of our parishes have joined the parish of Basildon in bringing relief to the refugees at Calais. As Father Dominic Howarth reminded us in his recent *Catholic Universe* article, this “particular chapter has closed, but – sadly – this story is far from ended for hundreds of thousands now in Europe and millions across the world fleeing violence and terror”.

Refugees, migrants and the victims of human trafficking are our sisters and brothers wherever and whenever we meet them.

In the Magnificat, Mary reminds us that the mercy of God is needed in every age: “Beneath the Cross, she saw the good thief receive pardon, and she took Jesus' disciple as her son. She is the Mother of Mercy, to whom we entrust ourselves: every situation we are in, every prayer we make, when lifted up to his merciful eyes, will find an answer.” (Pope Francis' homily for the ending of the Year of Mercy)

Once again I turn to the Venerable Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, for a blessing of mercy: “May God preserve you and bless you and grant you all the graces and precious gifts reserved for this holy time.”

I wish you a joyful and blessed Advent with Christ and Mary,

+*Alan, sm*

Bishop of Brentwood