

**Pastoral letter for the Solemnity of
Mary, the Holy Mother of God**

(Please read and/or make available at all Masses during the weekend of the 31Dec/1 Jan)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In today's Gospel reading we are given a precious insight into Mary, the Mother of Jesus and Mother of God: 'As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart'.

Mary is the unique witness to the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From the birth of our Saviour, she accompanies Jesus through his early years, is with him as he begins his public ministry at Cana; she journeys with him through his passion and cross and is present at the birth of the Church at Pentecost.

In all of this the mother of Jesus can be seen as 'The Great Believer' (Pope Emeritus Benedict) and the 'first disciple of the Lord' (Pope John Paul II).

Saints are the great optimists of our world: 'The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness' (the opening words of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* at the end of his first year as Pope).

Mary, the greatest of the Saints, is an astonishing icon of the grace of God: 'full of grace' she models for us a life of perfect faith and discipleship.

Next year I plan to go on pilgrimage to the Marian Shrines at Fatima, Knock, Lourdes and Walsingham. Each Shrine has its special aspect but present in them all are great numbers of pilgrims who, with Mary, seek to come closer to Jesus our Saviour and Redeemer.

All Christian pilgrimage finds its roots at Bethlehem: 'When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about him, and everyone who heard it was astonished... And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.'

I am always amazed at the generosity and service of those I encounter throughout the diocese and on my pilgrimages. Understandably, we may wish to forget the many challenges we face regarding the world's climate crisis, the unjust war in the Ukraine, the enduring inequalities confronted by the poor and refugees; in our own country increasing numbers of people are dependent on food banks as the cost of living becomes an increasing anxiety.

Yet in the midst of all of this, we need to believe and proclaim the enduring truth of the Gospel: 'God so loved the world that he sent his only Son' (John 10.10).

As we look forward to a New Year I am encouraged by the words of Pope Saint John Paul II when he spoke on the threshold of the third millennium after the birth of Christ: 'Faced with the sacredness of life and of the human person, and before the marvels of the universe, wonder is the only appropriate attitude. From this wonder there can come ...enthusiasm... People of today and tomorrow need this enthusiasm if they are to meet and master the crucial challenges which stand before us.

Thanks to this enthusiasm, humanity, every time it loses its way, will be able to lift itself up and set out again on the right path.'

May the wonder of Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds and all the saints of God encourage us in our pilgrimage to the house of God the Father as we follow Christ our Saviour and Redeemer.

'May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord let his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord uncover his face to you and bring you peace.'

Wishing you many blessings for the New Year,

In Christ and Mary,

+Alan Williams, sm
Bishop of Brentwood