

Pastoral Letter
Of
Terence Patrick Drainey



Bishop of Middlesbrough

First Sunday of Lent 2021

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

When Covid-19 first began to make its appearance, I thought, I presumed, I hoped it would be a one-day-wonder and would disappear as quickly as it came. After all, we had been warned about Sars and Avian Flu a few years ago, neither of which had any lasting impact or effect on us in this part of the world. But then it lasted longer than I thought. Surely things must get back to normal soon? Then I noticed that I was mentally, physically, emotionally, and even spiritually beginning to play a waiting game. I began to attempt to fill the day, create a routine that would somehow stop time hanging heavily on my hands. How fruitful that routine was, I am not sure now. How genuinely purposeful it was, who knows? But deep down inside I was waiting for things to return to “normal” and I think normal meant, as things were before Covid-19. When this normal returned then I could get on with my life, ministry, and future.

The other evening, I was listening to an interview about the financial state of our country, and the interviewer was asking whether a particular economic theory would succeed in restoring our fortunes. The respondent said something like this, *“Ah well, of course in the present situation this is not going to work very well but when we get back to reality, things will pick up again very quickly.”* And I thought, “reality”? The present situation, where we are now is reality. What the respondent was talking about was an era, a normal, a reality which had now passed into history and was no more. The present situation, with all its confusion, and uncertainty is the reality, is the normal. It is in this situation, to borrow words from St Paul, that *we live and move and have our being*.

It is within this present situation, this time of the pandemic, within the uncertainty and confusion that we heard the words of St Paul spoken to us on Ash Wednesday; *Well, this is the favourable time, this is the day of Salvation*. If we are to wait for the new normal, if we hanker after some future reality, then we are marking time, in fact, wasting time. God is calling us now; he is waiting to speak to our hearts now; he desires us to turn back to him now. He wants us to listen to his voice today; not tomorrow or some time in the future; but

now, as imperfect, and as uncertain as this now might appear. This is the day, the hour, the moment of our beginning to follow the Lord anew with all our hearts. Here Lent begins for us.

In some way, some strange and quirky way, Covid-19 might be doing us a spiritual favour, because this is how we should approach every Lent, recognising that the voice of God is cutting into the present reality of our lives and calling us back to him, calling us to a fresh beginning, a new start.

There is no time like the present, as the old saying goes. And that is precisely what Jesus is telling us in today's Gospel: 'The time has come, and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.' And our repentance and faith in the Good News, graced by the Lord, will bear much fruit in love. In his message for Lent this year, our Holy Father, Pope Francis reminds us: *To experience Lent with love means caring for those who suffer or feel abandoned and fearful because of the Covid-19 pandemic. In these days of deep uncertainty about the future, let us keep in mind the Lord's word to his Servant, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you" (Is 43:1). In our charity, may we speak words of reassurance and help others to realize that God loves them as sons and daughters.*

So today is the day, now is the time to begin our Lenten journey of conversion and change of heart, perhaps as we have never done so before. Let us hear the Lord speaking to our hearts in those words of St Paul and St Mark: *Well, this is the favourable time, this is the day of Salvation. Repent, and believe the Good News.*

May it be a graced and fruitful Lent for each of us leading to a joyful Easter.

Yours in blessed hope,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Terence Patrick".

Bishop of Middlesbrough

To be read and made available on the Weekend of 20/21 February 2021 in all churches and chapels of the Diocese – also to be found in video form on the Diocesan website and YouTube