



Pastoral Letter
Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle

To be read in all churches and chapels in the
Diocese on 28th and 29th December 2019

My dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,

Christmas is a time of gifts. Most of us exchange gifts at this time with our family and friends as a sign of our love and friendship for them. To give a gift to another involves the effort of thinking of an appropriate present which will be useful and bring them happiness. It also involves our time and expense in obtaining it and then there is the joy of giving the gift to the other and witnessing their joy and gratitude. Of course, the underlying motive in all this is love.

At Christmas we celebrate the greatest gift that God has given to the world – his Son, Jesus Christ. Our giving of gifts is a shadow of the love that God has shown us. Jesus is the perfect gift, given at the right time and in the right place. St Paul tells us the Lord was born “in the fulness of time.” (cf Gal 4:4) More especially the joy and gratitude that we feel at receiving such a great gift from God is one that informs and shapes our lives. When we look at the Christ child in the crib, we are looking at the face of God. “To have seen me is to have seen the Father”; (cf Jn 14:9) St John tells us. Christmas is above all a time for us to give thanks and reflect that the God who made the stars and sky has become a weak and vulnerable child, so that we may have the opportunity to see, know and love him. The Christmas message is one which we carry with us every day of our lives.

Furthermore, we need to be thankful to God for his precious gift of creation. Pope Francis is leading the way in calling us to be aware of what we have done to our world and the certainty that, without immediate and sustained action, we will inflict irreparable damage on our planet, adversely affecting the lives of future generations. The Holy Father tells us that every one of us must make changes to our lives and begin to repair the damage before matters become irreversible. It is time for us all to “wake up” and, if we have not already done so, engage in the practical actions necessary to make the essential difference.

This is a matter rooted in our Faith. Creation is God's gift to us and we are called to be stewards of creation. But for far too long we have exploited our world and its resources, often in ignorance as to the consequences, having no regard for the impact of our actions. But now we are coming to understand what we have done. We have time to correct the damage, if we act quickly.

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As we continue to celebrate Christmas with our families and friends, we should also recall the circumstances of dire poverty in which our Lord was born. We have heard in today's gospel how the Holy Family even became refugees, having to flee for their lives from a despotic regime. There are many people today in our own country and around the world who suffer in similar circumstances of poverty and exile. In a recent meditation on the Christmas Crib the Holy Father wrote:

“The presence of the poor and the lowly in the nativity scene remind us that God became man for the sake of those who feel most in need of his love and who ask him to draw near to them. Jesus, “gentle and humble in heart” (Mt 11:29) was born in poverty and led a simple life in order to teach us to recognize what is essential and act accordingly”.

As Christians we cannot stand by and watch as these human tragedies unfold but stand up and let our voices be heard for those who have no voice.

Finally, on the feast of the Holy Family I would like to greet the families of our diocese and to ensure you that you are much in my prayers at this time. Your family life is a sign to the world of the Lord's faithful love for the Church and the whole of humanity. Thank you for your witness to this. Indeed, I would like to extend my prayers and good wishes to all the people of Hexham and Newcastle in this blessed season. I hope and pray that as we begin a new decade of the twenty first century, we will continue to journey together with hope to become an ever more vibrant and faithful local Church.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "+ Robert Byrne CO." The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

✘ Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle