

DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



Rt Rev Séamus Cunningham
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle



February 2010

Pastoral Letter for Lent **To be read in all parishes weekend of 20th / 21st February 2010**

My dear people,

In our Diocese, we are blessed with the island of Lindisfarne, just off the Northumbrian coast. As you know, this Holy Island has been a place of pilgrimage, penance and prayer for many centuries. And still today, people are drawn to its beauty and solitude in their search for God and for inner peace. The Pilgrim's Way between the main land and the island marks with wooden posts the safe path to walk at low tide over the sands. This route gives direction and safety, and a good sense of direction, especially to people who walk the path in prayer and penance to the island of St Aidan and St Cuthbert.

During Lent, the Church calls on us to check the direction we are walking and to return to the path which God sets for us. It is a time when we are called to repentance and radical conversion, which means a real change of heart. But if we are to understand what repentance and conversion are all about, we must first understand what sin means. And in order to do that, we must get our image of God right. A good Lent question to ask is: What is my image of God? How do I see God?

The God we are dealing with is a God who, through Jesus, loves us unconditionally. This means that God does not hold grudges against us. God searches for us first. No matter how much we might try to run away from God, it's as if God chases after us, and seeks us first. The poet Francis Thompson, who spent some time as a student at Ushaw College, wrote in his famous poem *The Hound of Heaven*:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

No matter how often we fail to love God, no matter how often we try to avoid God, God never stops loving us. God says to us: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love, and I am constant in my affection for you.'

But in many ways, it is easier to know this with my mind, to believe it as an idea. But the real question is: Do I really experience it each day and feel it each day in my heart? It is important for us in our prayer to ask God to reveal God's love to us in our ordinary, everyday lives.

Once I experience God's love in my life, then I can understand what sin is all about. Sin is not just a question of breaking a law, a rule or a regulation. Sin is simply a failure to love. Sin is a

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breakdown in relationship. Sin damages my relationship with God, it damages my relationship with myself, and it damages my relationship with others. Sin makes me feel ill at ease with God, with myself, and with others. Sin scars me deep down and leaves me in need of deep healing. Through sin, I feel the deep need to be reunited with God, with myself and with those around me, and especially with the community. And I must be able to forgive myself.

So it is important to be able to face myself, to journey deep within, allowing God to reveal those areas in my life that are in need of His healing. As these areas begin to surface, it is important for me to name them, and to claim them, and to let God touch them with His healing power.

This healing takes place in a special way through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This, as we know, is a Sacrament of Healing that brings me before the Lord Jesus, saying 'Here I am Lord, this is me. This is the kind of person I am –hurt, wounded, broken and weak. Please touch me with your healing power and make me whole.'

Through this Sacrament, I go away healed and forgiven. I find new direction for the way ahead. Peace is restored and I am given the strength to face the future with hope.

Lent gives us the opportunity to face ourselves, with God's grace, and to seek new directions, as He shows us the true path of His unconditional love and forgiveness. During Lent, I want to encourage all of us to celebrate the great Sacrament of Reconciliation in our parishes with true humility and confidence. This Sacrament gives us the guidance we need for our return to God, through His grace.

When I feel the need to be forgiven, God's grace is working in me. It is God's grace that leads me to examine my conscience, to see how I have fallen short of what God wants of me. And when I speak my sins in the Sacrament, it is Jesus through his priest, who hears me. It is Jesus who listens and gives guidance. It is Jesus who hears my prayer of contrition and who leads me on to the right path. As Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote:

Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom, lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home; lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.

May this Lent be a time of deep conversion and renewal for each of us. May the Lord lead you to deeper love and commitment as his disciples.

With very best wishes,

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