

DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



✠ *Rt Rev Séamus Cunningham*
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle



Pastoral Letter

to be read on 5th Sunday of Easter

in preparation for Welcome Back Sunday - Pentecost Sunday

My dear people,

Life, no matter how we might like to control it, is an unpredictable mixture of happiness and success, sorrow and disappointment. We all experience times of great joy, the birth of a new baby, exams passed, a loan paid off, a wonderful holiday, the return of a family member or friend after a long absence. There are so many things to celebrate in life and give thanks to God for. Equally we all experience the sorrow of life, an illness, worry about a loved one, divorce or the death of someone we love. Statistics show that an ever increasing number of us suffer from depression in the face of life's disappointments, dull routine and emptiness. One of the most painful sorrows of life is to be seriously let down by another.

Our gospel today begins with the words "When Judas had gone." Judas was leaving to betray Jesus to the authorities for 30 pieces of silver. It is easy to forget that one of the most painful aspects of the suffering of Jesus was his mental anguish and betrayal by his disciple and friend.

Today we are all too well aware that the church to which we all belong has hurt people and let them down. There is a tremendous call for us all to work for reconciliation and healing to reach out to so many who stay away from church for many different reasons.

In this Year of Faith I thank God when I hear that during lent people have returned to the practise of their faith through the sacrament of reconciliation; in some case after many years! This reminds us that it is never too late to welcome people back to the faith and that despite the hurts and disappointment that people have suffered a word and gesture of reconciliation and love can make a real difference, as Jesus makes it clear in the gospel "By this love you have for one another everyone will know that you are my disciples."

We need to ensure that the people know that the church's door is always open and that like Paul and Barnabus in the first reading we proclaim the word by the witness of our lives. They put fresh heart into the young growing churches and encouraged them to persevere in the faith.

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Pope Francis said recently "God always waits for us even when we have left him behind. He is never far from us, and if we return to him he is ready to embrace us – he does not close the door, he waits."

As God waits he needs us to make sure that everyone knows that the door is open and that is why each year we have a welcome back Sunday which this year takes place on the 19th May, Pentecost Sunday. It is a time for us to pray for all those who no longer come to church and to look for opportunities to put fresh heart into them and invite them back and where there is need to ask forgiveness on behalf of the whole church.

The Evangelisation Team is ready to offer help and support. Every parish is encouraged to send two representatives to a preparation day on 4th May from 10 am – 1 pm at St Joseph's, Gateshead. They will receive invitation cards for parishioners to hand out and will find out how best to make our parishes places where we look out in love as commanded by Jesus in our gospel. Can I ask you to begin now by spending a few moments thinking of someone whom you can open the door of faith to and put fresh heart into. (30 seconds of silence.)

The book of the Apocalypse tells us 'the world of the past is gone. I am making the whole of creation new'. For this to become a reality we need a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit to enable us to reach out to those who no longer walk with us. May God bless you in your efforts as disciples of Jesus in this Year of Faith to make a new beginning for so many who need a fresh heart and to know that they are loved.

With my very best wishes

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