

# DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



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



## **Pastoral Letter for 6<sup>th</sup> December 2015 - 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent**

My dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ

I write to you today, as your Bishop, to tell you that I am in need of mercy. I need the mercy of those whom I have hurt and offended. I need the mercy of those to whom I should have given more help. Above all, I need the mercy of God. I ask for your mercy and I pray for His.

I am sure you are aware that you, too, are in the same situation. We all need that healing of our hearts and minds which forgiveness brings. The great danger is that even though we know we need forgiveness we put off seeking it out. This can be because we fear being humiliated or being told off. Perhaps we delay asking for forgiveness, telling ourselves that we will do something about it later. Sometimes we fall into that mistake of thinking we have gone too far; that it is too late or even that we cannot be forgiven.

Do not let yourself be trapped by these ways of thinking. God's mercy is for all people and he wants everyone to come to him with trust and confidence. The mercy of Jesus is kind and understanding; now is the time; it is never too late; he forgives all things. Let his gentle healing put your worries to rest.

Pope Francis invites us to enter a year in which we can seek out and show mercy. He has announced that a Jubilee Year of Mercy is to begin for the whole Church this Advent. It starts on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> December, when we celebrate the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady. On that day, in St Mary's Cathedral in Newcastle, we shall have the Sacrament of Forgiveness available all day from the end of a 7.15 am Mass in the morning through to 8 pm that night. At 10.30 am I will give a talk in the Cathedral about this great Year and what the gift of mercy and forgiveness can mean for you during the coming months. We shall also have Mass at the usual time of 12.05 pm. I ask that my brother priests concelebrate with me at that Mass, if they are able.

I urge you to come to the Cathedral on that day. I want to encourage you to make a special effort to make the journey. If you can't, I know that your priest will be providing other opportunities to receive the mercy of God's love.

We have a duty to think also of those we know who long for mercy but who feel they would be refused or turned away. If you know of anyone who is in that situation, please, I ask you, encourage them to come to the Cathedral on that day or to seek out the Sacrament of Reconciliation in this special time. This Year of Mercy is a gift especially for those who feel that it is not for them. Forgiveness is one of the most

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beautiful and important gifts we can receive. We all know that Mercy can only be given; we cannot bargain for it or demand it. But Jesus wants us all to know that he gives it readily and freely to those who sincerely ask him.

Pope Francis is asking us not only to look for mercy but also to think how we ourselves can show mercy. This sacred time is for mending bridges, putting things right and welcoming those who are estranged. It is a time for healing in families and between friends; a time for gentle mercy and acceptance.

Mercy is also about coming to the aid of those who are in need. We speak of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy in which we think of practical ways in which we can be of help. Mercy is to be more than a soft glow in the heart, it must also be a firm resolve to assist others. During this Year there will be opportunities to come together to think about how we can be more effective in our care. I ask that you make it a special priority in your own thinking of how you could find new and better ways to support others.

We are beginning this Year of Mercy in Advent and one of the great ideas of this season is about preparing the Way. John the Baptist calls on people to make a straight path for the Lord so that we may see God's salvation. This is about being ready to meet Jesus when he comes to us in our homes, in our work, in daily ups and downs. Turning to God, asking for healing and mercy, is to clear the way so that we can welcome Jesus into our lives.

There have been many Holy Years in the past and each one has provided particular opportunities to obtain the fullness of God's mercy. The Church has attached Indulgences to these years as special ways in which the forgiveness of God can completely heal us. Pope Francis offers to us this special gift again in the Year of Mercy. Let the richness of God's mercy help you to clear the path to your heart.

In today's first reading, the prophet Baruch invites us to look at preparing the way from a different angle. The path to be prepared is for a journey we are to make. We hear that God will prepare a way so that his sons and daughters may return home. We are told God will guide us by the light of his glory with his mercy and integrity for escort. It is a return home for each of us to make. We are promised that God's mercy and power will be there to help us on our pilgrim way through life.

Jubilee Years are about pilgrimage. They have a tradition of Holy Doors, many of them opened in Rome through which pilgrims can enter the House of God to receive the mercy and strength which Jesus brings.

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The Jubilee Year of Mercy has a difference; every Cathedral, in every diocese, is to have a Holy Door. This is so that everyone throughout the world can celebrate the pilgrim journey to God and recognise how we can all come home and be forgiven and be accepted.

On Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> December, on the same day that Holy Doors are being opened all over the world, we shall open one at St Mary's Cathedral. We shall open it at 3.00 pm and all are welcome to share this special event. It will remain open throughout the Jubilee Year until it ends on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2016, the Feast of Christ the King.

I invite you to come to the Cathedral during the Year of Mercy and when you come bring others with you. These visits, as you enter through the Holy Door, will be opportunities to pray and reflect upon your journey of faith and how we all have a home in God. We are being given this Year to think and pray about the welcome given to others in our Church and in all our churches. We have this sacred time to reflect upon our heavenly home and on all our homes where we belong as family members.

Brothers and Sisters, I need mercy and so do you. Let this Year of Mercy be one of peace and joy for your heart. Let this time of Mercy be a year you will never forget.

With my very best wishes

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