

DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



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



Pastoral Letter -Welcome Back Sunday

To be read in all churches on weekend of 5th Sunday of Easter – 17th/18th May 2014

My dear people

As a newly ordained priest, I remember house visiting in the parish. In some houses I was invited into the kitchen or other room that the family clearly lived in a lot of the time, but on other occasions I was invited into a much more formal front room. This room had a chill about it even though an electric fire may have been hastily put on and I was left with the impression that this was not a room for normal family life but for high days and holidays only!

Today in the gospel we are reassured by Jesus that in his Father's house there are many rooms and that he is preparing a place for us. Do not let your hearts be troubled he tells us and trust in me. Jesus is not telling us that our eternal destiny is to some chilly front room kept pristine for occasional use. He wants to invite us to the family room, a living room, the fulfilment of all we have already been called to as St Paul reminds us in our second reading, when by our baptism we have become the living stones making up a spiritual house. Called out of darkness into his wonderful light; a chosen people.

In three weeks time we will celebrate Pentecost Sunday when filled with the Holy Spirit the apostles went out to proclaim the Good news and to invite people to become living stones making up a spiritual house, a chosen race, a royal priesthood a consecrated nation. That is why we also call this great feast at the culmination of the Easter Season, 'Welcome Back Sunday.'

Welcome back Sunday is not just a day to invite those who have drifted away from the practice of their faith to take another look and join us at Mass, but a Sunday to ask ourselves what we are inviting people to. This is the work of every Sunday and of every day of the year. For some people entering the door of a church can be very daunting, a bit like being invited into the chilly formal front room of houses in years gone by. It can be difficult for people at times to sense the warmth, something living and welcoming in our church communities. It can be difficult for them to experience that we are truly those living stones making up a spiritual house, with many rooms for many people. We are used to our churches and our parish communities but have we let them become formalised, for Sunday best, not a place for all to feel welcome, included and at home?

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Pope Francis has both challenged and inspired us to be 'the house of the Father with doors wide open' in his Apostolic Exhortation '*Evangelii Gaudium*'. He not only encourages us to have the very doors of our church open but the other less obvious doors open so that "everyone can share in some way in the life of the church; everyone can be part of the community." He warns us that the church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems. 'My hope', says Pope Francis, 'Is that we will be moved by fear of remaining shut up within structures which give a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat"' (Mk 6:37 cf. E. G. 47, 48, 49).

I hope that we can all look at ways to meet this challenge not just on Welcome Back Sunday but throughout the year. Perhaps we can try on Welcome back Sunday, the feast of Pentecost, to keep the doors of church open for as long as possible but more than this, we can meet the challenge of keeping those others doors open, making the church a realisation even now of the many rooms of the Father's house promised by Jesus the Risen Lord.

I am sure you will find the Preparation Morning offered on 24th May helpful in organising this in your parish.

With very best wishes

+ Séamus

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