

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER



FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE HOLY FAMILY 2023

APPOINTED TO BE READ AT ALL PUBLIC MASSES IN ALL CHURCHES AND CHAPELS
IN THE DIOCESE OF LANCASTER ON THE WEEKEND OF 31st DECEMBER 2023.

My dear people,

Today's Feast is a gift of hope for humanity and creation. We see a very young family keeping traditions of faith as an expression of their trust in a loving God. And that God is not far away; He is held in their arms. They show us God who entrusts Himself to us, daring to place Himself in our care. In the culture of today, I ask myself, was that wise? Did He do a risk-assessment?! Of course, it is an irrelevant question; being God, He knows exactly what is at stake.

Let us notice how Mary and Joseph let Simeon, a stranger, take their child in his arms. Having come into the world, the Infant-Lord is already going out beyond family confines. And what an influence He has! Simeon sings of God's promises kept, and the *Nunc dimmitis* has become a beautiful hymn in the night prayer of the Church. What an aid for peaceful sleep; to pray Simeon's words, believing that in spite of all that troubles us, the Lord has heard the cry of the poor and keeps His promise to save us even as we sleep.

A temptation of old age, I find, is to spend my time looking back. Part of that looking back will inevitably be on unfulfilled hopes and dreams, things that didn't go the way I would have preferred. This is especially true when there is a constant stream of new crises and complications to deal with. Simeon and Anna come as the antidote for such temptations. They come as prophets of hope both for the people of Jesus' day and for our own times.

How wonderful that we have these stories of Jesus' infancy and childhood from Saint Luke and others from Saint Matthew. They open our hearts to Jesus and draw us into the mystery of His Life and Mission, firstly, by taking us back to the historic events themselves, but secondly by giving those same events a contemporary presence and relevance. They are for now.

Another temptation is to think that the Holy Family had things rather easy, since God would protect them and constantly guide them in a 'Gold-star' level of privileged life. That is not the case. They were subject to the randomness of this life just as we are. Their burden of responsibility was severe. Think of the responsibilities of keeping a

small baby or adolescent healthy and safe, then listen to the news, and it becomes obvious how vulnerable even the most pampered child is. Vulnerability and weakness are appeals for trust and are ways into our lives chosen by God.

I end this Letter turning my thoughts to so many distressing places across the world, but particularly calling to mind the on-going catastrophes of Gaza and the Ukraine. How can we be prophets of hope in the face of such senseless destruction? How can we be Simeons and Annas for our brothers and sisters now? Believing that God is there can seem to make a mockery of faith, and yet that is what we must do because God does not stand back from violence and horror. He will not let evil have the last word. Our reason to hope is not of human origin but of God. We leave the miracles for God to perform, but He looks to us to live as people of hope. The coming of the Messiah once in Bethlehem, personally in our own times, and at the end of time give us sound justification for that hope. Let us follow the example of the young Holy Family by keeping our traditions of Faith in Him as generously as we can, in a spirit of Hope placed in Him, bearing fruit in Love of Him.

Jesus, Son of God, son of Mary, have mercy on us.

Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us.

Saint Joseph, guardian of the Holy Family and guardian of the Church, pray for us.

+Rt Rev Paul Swarbrick
Bishop of Lancaster