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**APPOINTED TO BE READ AT ALL PUBLIC MASSES IN ALL CHURCHES AND CHAPELS IN THE DIOCESE OF LANCASTER ON THE WEEKEND OF 25-26 February 2023**

Pastoral Letter First Sunday of Lent 2023.

My dear people,

At the beginning of Lent I address you with words of encouragement, knowing that you live complex and demanding lives. I address you as people of Faith, knowing that you can find it difficult to live your Faith in Christ as you should. We all long to be closer to God, but often we sense that we are failing in so many ways. The longing to be close to the Lord will not leave you, because it is God given.

Just a few weeks ago we were wishing one another a happy new year. All too quickly the world's realities assert themselves and our hopes for a happy 2023 have to be adjusted. The most recent global tragedy to gain our attention has been the earthquake affecting millions in Turkey and Syria. Many of you will already have made a personal contribution to help the relief work. The plight of those now homeless and bereaved and injured can help us reflect on our lives this Lent.

Note the contrast given in today's readings for the First Sunday of Lent. The Book of Genesis tells us how the Lord God fashioned us in His own likeness and breathed His life into us. It tells us how He placed us in a beautiful garden that would be the setting in which we would know His company and deepen our relationship with Him. Then, in the Gospel of St. Matthew, we see something shockingly different. The Son of God enters the harsh life-threatening wilderness to do battle face to face with the father of all evils. The one thing common to these contrasting scenes is the longing of the Father's heart to share His life with us. This truth deserves our full attention. When we lost our place in Paradise we had no ability of our own to regain that treasure. We were lost, like those buried under the rubble of their broken homes. We could only wait and hope to be rescued. Christ is sent to save, redeem and rescue us. He enters the wilderness, the ruins in which we lie, to find us and bring us back.

We know that for thousands in Turkey and Syria the rescuers will arrive too late. We know that for those who are found, the lives they had, cannot be restored. But Faith tells us that the longing in the heart of the Father does not offer us something we can describe as 'second-best'. The tragedies we experience in the world are beyond our own ability to put right, but this is not the case for God. What we see as impossibly lost is not so for God.



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This Lent, let us reflect often, daily, on the longings of the Father for us. Let us not consider first our own efforts but those of the Father. Jesus did this every time He went aside to pray. This is what motivated Him in all that He said and did. We must try to do the same. It will then motivate us to undertake with new heart, prayer, penance and works of generous charity. Do not lose heart. We set ourselves to do what we can with our lives and leave God to perform the miracles. The Sacrament of Confession is exactly where He performs many miracles.

Perhaps Mary knew that her Son had entered the wilderness. She had entered that wilderness too, when she said yes to the Archangel's message. She joined her own efforts to the 'relief operation' and will inspire each of you to do the same. The happiness of 2023 and any new year will not be found in the random affairs of the world, but in the persistent longing and action of the Father to find His lost children, to rescue us, and to return us to the garden He has created for us.

With my blessing, particularly for those who face hardships,

*+Paul Swarbrick.*

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