

**A PASTORAL LETTER
FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER
for Good Shepherd Sunday, 25 April 2021**



APPOINTED TO BE READ AT ALL PUBLIC MASSES IN ALL CHURCHES AND CHAPELS IN THE DIOCESE OF LANCASTER ON THE WEEKEND OF 24/25 April 2021 (or shared in whatever way is possible).

My dear people,

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year on this Fourth Sunday of Eastertide the Church prays for Vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life. Our heavenly Father knows well what is needed even before we pray, but Christ tells us we must pray always. We are very familiar with prayer of asking, prayer of intercession, the prayer that is a cry for help. We learn it easily whenever we have a problem or a fear or sickness, or whenever there is conflict.

Other forms of prayer can take more effort. A very important one is listening. Asking for vocations is important, but it must lead us to listen for vocations because a vocation is a response to the voice of the Good Shepherd's call. Creating an outer-silence helps us to listen with the heart, and can help others to hear too. Our silence will help them to recognise the Lord's reassuring voice. A noisy church can prevent someone hearing the call of the Good Shepherd.

The pandemic brought a profound change to our lives, much of that change has been unwelcome. However, one observation made by many has been how much they noticed the world growing quieter. As traffic and activity reduced, we have been able to notice the quiet of the natural world around us, enabling us to hear more birdsong for example.

We are people of Faith. Appreciation of creation is good but is not an end in itself. A work of art, a beautiful building, or a moving piece of music draws us towards the artist, the architect and inspired composer of whatever has captured our attention and wonder. Such beauty and awe become places of meeting with the Lord of Creation, the person of Jesus Christ.

Over the years, you have had many fine homilies and Pastoral Letters on vocations. Please God, many more are still to come. Sadly, the only point we often take from them is how long they are! Each of us needs to grow and try to become more attentive to the

voice of the Good Shepherd. This will not only help us individually; it will help others to become attentive too, and allow them to know the voice of Jesus. Perhaps the Samaritan woman our Lord once met by a well had come to draw water at a time when no one else was about partly because that was when the water was at its purest, when the silt had had time to settle after everyone else had finished stirring it up with their buckets. She wanted the best water for her family and for herself. Prayerful silence in our churches can be like that. We have the rest of the week for chatting.

Our Lord criticises the hired men. Their loyalty was not to the sheep but to their own needs and their own agenda. When they had got what they wanted they went. Good shepherds, good priests and religious, good parents, good teachers are prepared to stay with the sheep, even during the hardest times and most disturbing circumstances. They are prepared to stay even when there is suffering. We must be like that if we are to be like the Good Shepherd.

Our prayer for vocations must focus on our love for the gift that is the Most Holy Eucharist. The pandemic has threatened our appreciation of this gift. Online Masses can help us, but can never replace being physically present at Mass in our parishes. I know we have many who are unable to come to Mass because of sickness and frailty. But I strongly encourage you who can travel to make every effort to get back to Mass as restrictions ease. Make our churches places of strong silent prayer where people can sense the presence of our Lord and hear His voice. Be certain that some of those who will come are being called to the priesthood and the religious life. This matters because it is their way to heaven. Helping them to hear the Lord's call and to answer can be your way to heaven.

Pray for Deacon Stuart Chapple, to be ordained to the priesthood for the Diocese on June 26th, and for Philip Wrigley to be ordained Deacon at Oscott on the 6th June. Pray for Simon Marley in his first year at the Beda College, Rome, and for James Knight in his propaedeutic year at Valladolid, Spain

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to those priests and religious who have come from overseas to serve in our Diocese. It can be a great sacrifice to serve far from home, from loved ones and one's own culture, with years between visits home. It is a sacrifice for your Bishops, your communities and your families too. This becomes even more of a sacrifice during times of crisis. You are truly listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd. We are grateful for your presence and for your generosity, and ask the Lord to pour His blessings upon you.

With my blessing upon all who hear and read this Pastoral Letter,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Paul Swarbrick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rt Rev Paul Swarbrick
Bishop of Lancaster