



**Pastoral Letter of the Bishop of Nottingham
appointed to be read at all Masses
on the Second Sunday of Advent,
Saturday 8 / Sunday 9 December 2012**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Advent is a very challenging time for Christians who take their faith seriously. This is because it is a time of waiting, and waiting can be unnerving. I don't know anyone who likes waiting – whether it is waiting in a queue at the supermarket checkout, waiting for a train, or even waiting for Christmas. Waiting means accepting things which are outside our control: no matter how worked-up we may get, the train we are waiting for is not going to arrive any sooner because of our anxiety; although we might put up our Christmas tree today, Christmas Day will still fall on 25th December – and not a moment sooner.

Part of the frustration we feel about waiting is that when the waiting is over we may be faced with disappointment, such as when a holiday for which we have saved all year ends up being ruined by bad weather and delayed flights. But sometimes we are pleasantly surprised, and things are worth the wait.

Although the future would be much less troublesome for us if we could control it – which would make waiting easier on our nerves – the Christian approach to waiting is to understand the future as God's future. Rather than looking towards coming events which have been totally planned by us, so that there are no surprises, we are waiting for a time which comes to us, full of the unexpected and brimming over with God's grace. That is not very easy for us to grasp, because we all work to plans, diaries, schedules and 'to do' lists.

If we are not careful, we can end up planning God out of our lives – or, just as bad, giving him just enough space to make our life pleasant for the time being. The season of Advent reminds us that God cannot be planned for; rather, he should be prepared for. The future is not of our making, but is a gift from God. God comes to us in unexpected ways – as a baby lying in a manger, in the Eucharist under the form of bread and wine, in the Scriptures, and the acts of kindness we do for one another.

We did not plan any of this; in a similar way, we cannot plan for God intervening in our lives. Instead, he invites us to be open to him at all times, and to receive and use fully his precious gift of himself; as today's Gospel puts it, we are to 'prepare a way for the Lord, to make his paths straight', readying ourselves to welcome him.

As you know, throughout our Diocese, the *You are Living Stones* consultation process has been taking place. The responses which I have received from deaneries and parishes have been very rich and diverse, and will help us all to prepare for the future. Some parishes and deaneries are looking for instant change, thinking that the sooner our parishes are organised into new groups and clusters, the better. I can understand this reaction, because it is hard to face an uncertain future. Other parishes and deaneries have concentrated on the gifts of their people and see ways in which they can make their parish grow in collaboration with neighbouring parishes.

Inevitably a plan for pastoral collaboration between parishes will be formed, and I hope to have a discussion document ready for you in February 2013. It will be available in your parishes and on the diocesan website. This will give all of you – priests, deacons religious and parishioners of our Diocese – an opportunity to discuss the proposals and to make reasoned suggestions about

them so that they can be refined further as we prepare for our common future in the Lord's service.

This document will be based around two key themes, each of which has been reflected in the responses which I have received in *You are Living Stones*. The first is 'organic development': the Church is the Body of Christ, and we are all members of that body. Just as the different parts of the human body work in harmony together, so the members of the Body of Christ are called to work not in isolation, but rather in harmony, for the glory of God and the good of all his holy Church. The second theme is related to it, and it is 'co-responsibility'; this reflects the idea that because we are all members of the Church we all have an important role to play in her past, present and future. You will be able to read more about *You are Living Stones* in the information sheet which is being handed out at Mass today.

However, this new discussion document is not set in stone, and can only be a working document which will change as the years go by and our parishes develop new working relationships, within themselves and with other parishes. This process cannot work unless we adopt an 'Advent' attitude: we must wait patiently in the assurance that God will guide us and lead us to a new stage in the life of our Diocese, just as he has been guiding us and leading us up until this moment.

But, at the same time, we must prepare for the future using all the gifts of all our people – each and every one of us has gifts to share and a part to play. This approach will ensure that our future will be vibrant and full of the life of the Holy Spirit, because the future that awaits us is God's will for us – and not our plans for him!

St Paul tells us in today's second reading that he prays 'with joy' for his friends – we have much to be joyful about! Over the next three weeks, we will all be preparing to welcome the Christ-child into our lives once more. Let us all pledge that we will make a home for him by turning once again to the Lord, who is ever-loving, as well as getting ready for our family celebrations. Let us pray for – and show real practical concern for – those who cannot take part in such festivities because they are unemployed or homeless, sick in hospital or home alone, or because they are far from home due to war or migration. By our friendship and love for others, the light of Christ will spread more widely throughout the world.

May God bless you and your families in this holy season of Advent, and bring you much peace at Christmas,

+ Malcolm

Right Reverend Malcolm McMahon
OP Bishop of Nottingham



Bishop's House Nottingham
December 2012