



**Right Reverend Patrick Joseph McKinney  
Bishop of Nottingham**

**Pastoral Letter appointed to be read out at all Masses celebrated on  
Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> November and Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> December 2019.**

### **1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent**

**“The word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.” (Isaiah 55: 11)**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

‘The God who speaks’ is an initiative of the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales in partnership with the Bible Society. Its purpose is to encourage and help all Catholics to engage more deeply with the scriptures, as Pope Francis has asked us to do. It begins today, the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, the start of the Church’s liturgical Year, and it continues up until the end of December 2020. Why now? Well, the year 2020 marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Verbum Domini, the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI who wrote so beautifully there about the importance of the scriptures in our lives; it’s also the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St Jerome who spent much of his life translating the Bible and helping people to understand it. It was he who said, ‘If there is anything in this life that sustains a wise person and helps to maintain serenity amid the tribulations and adversities of the world, it is first and foremost I believe the meditation on and knowledge of the scriptures’ (1) ‘Ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of Christ’. (2)

I warmly commend 'The God who speaks' initiative to you, because I believe it serves to teach us how important the scriptures are in helping us to encounter God: to hear afresh what he asks of us in our daily lives, and to share with Him our joys, sorrows and anxieties. Throughout the year there will be national online resources to encourage us, individually, and as parish groups, to get more out of the Scriptures. We are asked to reflect upon 3 key themes which, as we will see, actually support and build so well upon our own diocesan themes of Encounter, Discipleship and Missionary Discipleship:

#### The first key theme is: **Celebrating God's Word**

We are encouraged to discover, or deepen still more, a love for the Word of God in the Bible, so that we may strengthen our relationship with Christ, whom we meet there. For Pope Benedict this was so important: 'There is no greater priority than this: to enable the people of our time once more to encounter God, the God who speaks to us and shares his love so that we might have life in abundance'. (3) This theme fits so well with our own diocesan emphasis on helping each other to encounter God's love, so that we might become more and more personally convinced of the living relationship that Christ wants with each of us.

#### The second key theme is: **Living God's Word**

We are invited to recognise how the scriptures encourage, challenge and inspire us to put our faith into action in our daily lives as Christ's disciples. Pope Benedict puts it this way, 'The word of God itself emphasises the need for our engagement in the world and our responsibility before Christ, the Lord of history. As we proclaim the Gospel, let us encourage one another to do good and to commit ourselves to justice, reconciliation and peace.' (4) Here again this theme resonates so well with our diocesan emphasis on encouraging each other to hear and to respond to Christ's personal call, 'Come, follow me'. St John Henry Newman expressed it so beautifully, 'God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another...He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work'. (5) Our endeavours to live out God's Word in our lives contribute greatly to a deepening personal understanding of what, as his disciples, Christ is asking of each of us.

#### The third key theme is: **Sharing God's Word**

We are urged to acknowledge how, over the centuries, the scriptures have actually inspired so much of our culture, art, music and literature, and how a knowledge of God's Word can help us to continue to be creative in the ways we share with others the Good News of Christ. Pope Francis does not mince his words: 'The study of the sacred scriptures must be a door opened to every believer. It is essential that the revealed word radically enrich our catechesis and all our efforts to pass on the faith.'

Evangelisation demands familiarity with God's word, which calls for dioceses, parishes and Catholic associations to provide for a serious, ongoing study of the Bible, while encouraging its prayerful individual and communal reading.' (6) As a diocese we are trying to become more outward looking, more missionary in the living out of our discipleship; we cannot do this without each of us becoming more at ease, more at home, with the scriptures.

All the recent Popes have encouraged us to read the Bible regularly, and Pope Francis is no exception. He challenges us to carry with us a pocket-sized Bible so that we can consult it at times in the day. He asks, what would happen if we read the message of God contained in the Bible as frequently as we read messages on our mobile-phones? He has suggested that the morning commute to work by bus or train could be a perfect time to open up our pocket-size bible or gospel and reflect each day on a few verses of God's Word. As a response to this challenge some pocket-size copies of Matthew's Gospel, the gospel we will mainly read throughout 2020, have been sent to all parishes in the diocese. This is to encourage parishes to buy enough copies for all parishioners. A monthly diocesan booklet will signpost helpful online material to enable us to understand Matthew's gospel better and to engage more confidently with other aspects of the Bible. It will also highlight and share scripture initiatives that are being tried in parishes and chaplaincies, so that we can learn from each other. School material has also been produced and some great initiatives are taking place.

As we begin with this Season of Advent, I pray that our engagement with the daily scriptures will help us to reflect on these three great truths: Christ has come; Christ will come again in glory; and Christ is now truly present amongst us. Let us remember the first with gratitude, look forward in hope to the coming again of Christ in glory, and try our best to respond generously to our daily encounters with Christ, truly present among us.

With prayer and good wishes,

+ Patrick

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1. St Jerome, Prologue to St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians
2. St Jerome, Prologue to the Book of Isaiah
3. Pope Benedict XVI, Verbum Domini, 2
4. Verbum Domini, 99
5. John Henry Newman, Meditations on Christian Doctrine, March 7, 2
6. Pope Francis, The Joy of the Gospel, 175.