



**PASTORAL LETTER
OF THE
MOST REVEREND BERNARD LONGLEY
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM
FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT, 6/7 APRIL 2019**

I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is commonly said that as we get older time seems to go much faster. That's certainly how it feels to me when I think how quickly the first four weeks of Lent have passed. That makes it all the more important to re-focus our Lenten efforts during the coming fortnight. Rather than recalling the missed opportunities so far for prayer, fasting and almsgiving, we should determine today what we can do in the time that is left and as Easter approaches.

We can make a real effort, in these two weeks which the Church often calls Passiontide, to pray and reflect on the Passion of Our Lord. In our prayer we can try to see every experience of Our Lord's as a gesture of love - his betrayal by Judas and abandonment by Peter, his trial and scourging, his gift of Our Lady as our mother and his death on the cross. These are all expressions of God's infinite love for us, even and especially when we don't deserve them.

Whatever our Lenten penances may be, they are only effective because they are a response to God's prompting, a response to grace. It is not by our own efforts alone that we gain forgiveness and salvation. As St Paul reminds us in his Letter to the Philippians: *I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts, the perfection that comes from the Law, but I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ.*

Faith in Christ means placing our trust in him, knowing that he will always provide whatever is best for us. He knows our needs better than we know them ourselves. Through our Lenten prayer and fasting and almsgiving he reveals what will truly bring us happiness. Lent helps us to glimpse the perfection that we could never achieve by ourselves but that Our Lord wishes to see reflected in us.

Whatever our personal sins and failings, today's reading from St John's Gospel must give all of us some courage and some hope. The story of the woman taken in adultery holds many messages. Judging from Our Lord's thoughtful response it is clear that, even at times when other people may have judged and condemned us, Jesus himself will not turn his back on us. When the scribes and Pharisees asked him persistently "What have you to say?" he put their question into its true context. It is as if he had said: "You have all seen this woman's sin, but can you not see your own sins?"

When we recognize our own failings it makes us not only aware of our need for forgiveness - it also softens our hearts towards the failings of others. Our Lord didn't interrogate the woman - he addressed his questions to her accusers. During Lent we have a keener awareness that we are all sinners in need of repentance. But we are on shaky ground if we rush to criticize or condemn others without first reviewing our own lives. We are a Church of sinners resolutely on the road of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Reading today's Gospel as a priest I've always associated the figure of Christ with the Church, the Body of Christ, entrusted with his own mission of reconciliation and forgiveness. We are invited to imitate his merciful love in our dealings with others and the Church exists to re-direct those who stray onto the pathways of healing and salvation.

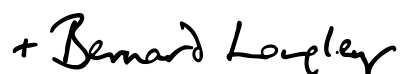
But listening to the Gospel reading today I can also see the Church clearly reflected in the experience of the woman brought before Our Lord. Just as this woman was exposed to the scrutiny and derision of her accusers, so the abuse scandal of recent years has exposed the crimes and failings that are a shameful part of the Church's story. It has highlighted the suffering of those who were harmed and often burdened for life because they were not believed.

Some of you may ask why I am addressing this matter again, and I realize that it is a painful and uncomfortable subject. But that cannot be compared with the abiding suffering of victims and survivors and I commend to you the Day of Prayer for Victims and Survivors of Abuse that we are keeping on Friday of this week.

Like the woman in St Luke's Gospel, the Church stands in the presence of Christ and waits for him to speak. Paschaltide reminds us that Our Lord's body was broken on the cross for us so that, by his wounds, we might be healed. The Church is also the place where broken lives are healed. Our Lord's message to all of us is: *Go away and do not sin any more.* With that heartening message of repentance and conversion we can approach the Sacrament of Penance knowing that Our Lord will not condemn us when we confess our sins.

I wish you and all those close to you every blessing as we approach Holy Week and look forward to Easter.

Yours devotedly in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Bernard Longley". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

✠Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham

Given at Birmingham on the 30 March 2019 and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Archdiocese on 6/7 April 2019