



A PASTORAL LETTER

On Silence and Listening to God's Word

to be read at all Masses on the First Sunday of Advent 2019

My dear brothers and sisters,

Advent begins amidst a General Election campaign which surely invites us to pray for those offering themselves for election and for the choice we must soon make as a nation. An election can be a time of many and conflicting words; yet, Advent calls for a renewed attentiveness to the Word, the word God spoke in His Son. For Christ himself is *"The eternal Word (who) became small – small enough to fit in a manger. He became a child so the word could be grasped by us"*.ⁱ We come to know Christ, the Eternal Word, through the Scriptures and the living tradition handed down in the doctrine, life and worship of His Church.ⁱⁱ

In the year ahead, we are celebrating a *Year of the Word* across England and Wales. This is an invitation to a renewed attentiveness to the God who speaks. We will heed the words of Saint Paul who urges us to, *"wake up now"*ⁱⁱⁱ and accept Isaiah's joyous invitation, *"Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord ... that he may teach us his ways ..."*^{iv} In the Gospel, Jesus Himself tells us why we must be so attentive, *"Stay awake ... you must be ready ..."* because *"the Son of Man is coming ..."*^v

We have need to read, study and above all, to pray the Scriptures because, as Saint Jerome memorably observed, *"Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ."* I hope you may be able to take advantage of the many opportunities in our 2020 Diocesan programme, to deepen our love and knowledge of Scripture. However, the Sacred Liturgy is the privileged place for us all to hear God's word. For when the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people.^{vi} In the celebration of every Mass, we see how the Word and the Eucharist are so closely bound together that Christ's presence in the word proclaimed leads us to recognise Him anew under the forms of bread and wine.^{vii}

As Emeritus Pope Benedict explained, *"Unless we acknowledge the real presence in the Eucharist, our understanding of Scripture remains imperfect"*.^{viii} In every Mass, we want our hearts to burn within us as we hear all the Scriptures which speak of Christ, so we can say with the first disciples, He *"explain(s) the Scriptures to us."* For it is Christ Himself we seek through all the pages of Scripture, leading us to open our eyes in faith to recognise Him in the Sacrifice and Sacrament of the Eucharist.^{ix}

A precondition for so recognising Him is something we can lack amid all the noise of contemporary life: that is attentive silence. Saint John of the Cross reflected that, *"The Father spoke one Word, which was His Son, and this Word He always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence (He) must be heard ..."*^x This leads us to gather quietly in preparation for Mass; to listen silently to the Scriptures read and proclaimed; and to go to our knees in deepest silence as the priest lifts the Host and Chalice that all eyes may be fixed on Him, present as God and man.^{xi} In a remarkable book entitled *"The Power of Silence Against the Dictatorship of Noise"* (2007), Cardinal Robert Sarah reflects on our need for silence. For without silence we cannot hear the God who speaks nor recognise Him in the silence of the Eucharist. We all need to find this silence in our lives, yet sometimes our parish churches can lack the attentive silence of prayer, and an excess of talking can mark church life today when we have such need of deeper and more attentive silence. Cardinal Sarah quotes the words of Saint Teresa of Calcutta who said, *"God is the friend of silence ... the more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in active life ... The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through us. Jesus is always waiting for us in silence."*

At the beginning of Advent, may I invite you to seek such silence and to rebel in your own lives against "the dictatorship of noise" so we hear the God who speaks. Let us find some time each day for silent prayer; quietly open the pages of the Gospel and take up the Gospel prayer of the Rosary which leads us into the silent prayer of Mary's Immaculate Heart.^{xii} Let us spend the precious time before Mass coming to know the silence of Christ's presence in the Blessed Sacrament. There, as Mother Teresa said so simply, *"Jesus is always waiting for us in silence."* Together with Pope Francis, let us ask Our Lady to help us listen^{xiii} so we can pray amid the confusion of conflicting words and the uproar of many voices, *"Let it be to me according to your word"*.^{xiv}

May I wish you an Advent blessed by such silence, and a truly happy Christmas.

+ Mark

Bishop of Shrewsbury

ⁱ Pope Benedict XVI Christmas Homily 2006

ⁱⁱ Cf. Dei Verbum n. 8

ⁱⁱⁱ Rom 13: 11

^{iv} Is. 2:5

^v Mt. 24: 42-44

^{vi} Cf. General Instruction to The Roman Missal 29, Sacrosanctum Concilium n.7

^{vii} Cf. Saint Paul VI, Mysterium Fidei n. 39

^{viii} Cf. Verbum Domini n. 55

^{ix} Cf. Lk. 24: 13-35

^x Spiritual Maxims

^{xi} Cf. Lk. 4: 20

^{xii} Cf. Lk. 2:19

^{xiii} Cf. Aperuit Illis n. 15

^{xiv} Lk. 1:38