

# Bishop's Pastoral Letter for the 1st Sunday of Lent 2017

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

At this time of the year we often talk in terms of beginning our Lenten Journey. It is good to make a simple point that by beginning a journey we hope that when we finish it we are in a different place or at least in a different state having completed all that has been necessary to get us from point A to point B. Planning is required, movement is necessary, energy has to be expended, effort has to be made. Something has to be left behind in order to gain the goal to which we are aiming, for which we are striving.

The word "Lent" comes from an old English word "Lencten" which means to lengthen. Although in January the year seems to stand still and the light evades us both in the morning and the evening, yet as we move into February and March, we can see that the days are lengthening and the earth spends longer in the light of the sun. The garden begins to live again and growth is set in motion. A lot of words that we use in a spiritual sense often began literally in the garden. We talk about sweeping the rubbish away, turning over a new leaf, digging deeper, putting down strong roots. It is not surprising really when we think that the journey on which we are all engaged in life began in earnest when we were thrown out of the Garden of Paradise. Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer, suffered his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, was buried in a tomb in a garden and, after his resurrection, was seen by Mary Magdalen who thought he was a gardener.

So where will your journey take you this Lent? From what are you moving away and where do you want to arrive? The Church over the centuries has provided us with a good map in the readings of our Lenten Masses. Probably the most memorable is the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke chapter 15. And for me the best compass is the phrase: "*I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants.*" So he left the place and went back to his father." If our Lenten journey is to be fruitful and of value to us it must be a journey away from the foreign land of sin back to our home in our Father's house.

Our first parents were thrown out of the Garden of Paradise because they wanted to taste of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In a way it was because they wanted to usurp God's position and become gods themselves. But it is only by being grafted to the Tree of Life that we can survive. Amidst the confused tangle and jungle which we have allowed the garden of the world to become, we need to find again the Tree of Life. And there is only one that I know of. It was planted by the Lord Jesus, the Son of God who became man. Speaking on Palm Sunday in 2006, Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI said: "*Palm Sunday, however, tells us that the great 'Yes' is precisely the Cross, that the Cross itself is the true tree of life. We do not find life by possessing it, but by giving it. Love is a gift of oneself, and for this reason it is the way of true life symbolized by the Cross.*"

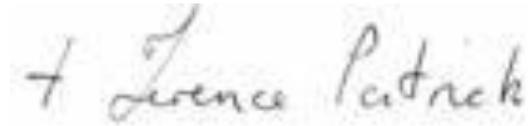
Pope Francis said on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in 2013: "*The Church Fathers always compared the tree of Paradise with the tree of sin ... The tree of Paradise did such great harm, whereas the tree of the Cross brings us salvation and health, and pardons that harm. It is this itinerary that human history follows. It is a way that enables us to encounter Jesus Christ the Redeemer, who lays down his life for love.*"

And what are the tools that we will use to tend the particular part of the garden in which we live? Well, they are known to all of us – prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Each one is inter-linked with the other; we need all three. Prayer without fasting and almsgiving can prove sterile. Fasting without almsgiving and prayer might become self-centred. Almsgiving without prayer and fasting can be just philanthropy.

So journey well from the foreign land of sin to your home in our Father's house, and rediscover the Tree of life, the Cross of Salvation, planted in your garden. Make sure you are well grafted on to it and growing healthily. Use those tools of prayer, fasting and almsgiving so as to bear true paschal fruit this Easter and throughout the coming year.

*As the days lengthen and earth spends longer in the light of the sun, grant that we may spend longer in the light of your presence, O Lord. And may those seeds of your word, long since buried in our hearts, grow, like everything around us, into love for you and your holy people. Grant, O God, that this Lent may be a spring-time for our lives in Christ.*

Yours in blessed hope,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lawrence Patrick". The signature is written in a dark ink on a light-colored background.

Bishop of Middlesbrough  
29.01.2017