

Pastoral Letter

1st Sunday of Advent 2016

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This year we have a good long Advent, as long as it can be; four whole weeks representing, so we are told, the four thousand years that passed between the Fall of Adam and Eve and the Coming of the Promised Messiah in the birth of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Son of Man and Son of Mary. So there is plenty of time to prepare. But don't day-dream and dawdle, rather *"you must wake up now: our salvation is even nearer than it was when we were converted,"* as we are told in the Letter to the Romans in our second reading. *"So stay awake, because you do not know the day when your master is coming,"* adds St Matthew in our Gospel. Yes, we have a long Advent but don't be fooled, don't put off until tomorrow what you should do today; *"stand ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."*

Seize the day, then, because before we know where we are we will be in those last few days leading up to Christmas itself. During that week of preparation there is a passage from St Matthew's Gospel that should appear twice. I half suspect, though, that many of us will never have read it or heard it read. It occurs on the 17th December and again at the Vigil Mass of Christmas. It is quite long and full of lots of difficult-to-pronounce names and because there is a shortened version of it at the Christmas Mass, it often gets missed out.

Many of us today are fascinated by our personal history, our family tree, yet when the opportunity actually arises to hear about the origins, the genealogy of Jesus Christ some of us just give it a miss. The family tree of Jesus goes right from Abraham down to *"Jacob...the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary; of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ."* Not counting repeats, I think there are 45 named people covering 36 generations and Jesus is the sum, the summit of them all.

Among all these people are some very famous names that all of us would recognise and expect to be there; great Leaders, Patriarchs, Priests, Kings and Heroes of the Chosen People. Interestingly enough, however, there are quite a few double-dealers, dishonest and weak rulers, and less than morally perfect individuals. Unusually in a family tree which predominantly follows the male line, besides Mary, the Mother of Jesus, there are three other women included whose marital status is less than regular according to the standards of their day. I'll leave you to look up the details! And there are also many names about whom we know precious little. However, all form part of the family tree, the origins, the genealogy of Jesus who is called the Christ.

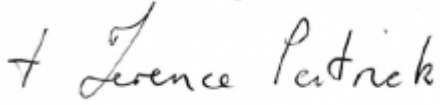
We often hear the phrase that *"God can write straight with crooked lines."* We perhaps might use it of ourselves from time to time. Well, that certainly seems to be the case looking at the family tree of Jesus. Despite human weakness and sinfulness, God can choose and use whoever he wants to fulfil his divine plan. God can choose the great and the good, the famous and the heroes, the Kings and the Patriarchs. He can work his plan out through double-dealers, dishonest and weak rulers. Even individuals who are less than morally perfect can be agents of God's providence. And then there are the ones about whom little is known, they are still a vital part of bringing God's will to fruition.

We celebrate Advent and Christmas this year in the wake of the Extraordinary Holy Year of Mercy. I have no doubt that each one of us will have learned much during the course of the last twelve months concerning the overwhelming mercy of God towards us personally and to all who turn to him in their need. We have heard so many times, and hopefully understood in our hearts, that Jesus is the sign, the incarnation of the Father's mercy and love. Having been shown mercy ourselves it is our duty to be agents of mercy to others. What has been given to us is to be shared with others. And there is no excuse. We are called to be bearers of mercy, proclaimers of the Good News, disciples of Jesus the Christ. Just like those who have gone before Jesus, those who follow after him will be made up of the great and the good, the famous and the heroes. God is

working out his plan through double-dealers, dishonest and weak rulers, both religious and civil. Even individuals that are less than morally perfect can be agents of God's providence. And then there are the ones about whom little is known, they are still a vital part of bringing God's will to fruition. I just pray that there is a Terry somewhere among them and all of you as well!

I do hope that you will hear something of the family tree of Jesus this year, or at least have the holy curiosity to look it up for yourself – St Matthew's Gospel, chapter 1 verses 1-25 – and as you read it, take heart and courage, draw strength and deep joy that the One who is born to us is called "*Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.*" He is The Christ, The Anointed One, The Promised One, The Chosen One of God whose other name is "*Emmanuel, a name which means 'God-is-with-us'*" May you both know and experience this truth during this holy season.

Yours in blessed hope,



A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Terence Patrick". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background. Below the signature, there is a dashed horizontal line.

Bishop of Middlesbrough