

Pastoral Letter for the First Sunday of Advent 30<sup>th</sup> November 2025.

Advent, A Time of Challenge and Hope

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

May I wish you all a joyful Church New Year. Advent invites us all to wake up, be people of the light not darkness, be ready to meet the Lord who is coming. Yes, we prepare to meet the Lord at Christmas. Though Advent also draws our attention to the Lord's coming at the end of time and to His coming here and now, in His Word, in the Eucharist and in His Church.

Our readings challenge us. They speak of the last things, our mortality, the finite creation in which we live, the judgement that we all face. We are invited to be ready like a householder keeping out a burglar. Not the most comforting of images. St. Paul challenges us to live moral lives. Put on the armour of light and cast-off darkness. Avoid sin.

Our readings are full of hope too. They speak of our salvation won for us by the Lord, the Lord's victory over all the challenges we face. He never abandons us. In our First Reading and again in the Psalm we have the hope filled image of the people on pilgrimage to the House of the Lord. All the nations flowing to God so that they may be taught by the Lord and be people of peace. We are in the final days of our Jubilee Year. Its call to be Pilgrims of Hope does not end. Like the pilgrims in our readings today we journey to the House of the Lord with joy so that *He may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.*

The Advent readings are challenging and hopeful at the same time.

Hope and challenge are found in the life of the Church in every age. Having served as your Bishop for just over two years now, may I briefly reflect with you on the hope I see and some of the challenges we need to discern together.

Hope fills our communities, and it is a joy and privilege to experience it as I visit our parishes, schools and institutions. The love of the Lord you have and show is inspiring. The love is expressed in the welcome to others and in your generous and compassionate service. I see saints among us full of the love of the Lord. Thank you.

May I share one reality of hope among many. The number of adults seeking to be in full communion with the church is increasing in our Diocese and across our country. Noticeably the adults are younger than in former years. The holiness and beauty of the liturgy and the spaces we offer for prayer are ways many discover the Lord calling them. In a noisy world offering false satisfaction, many find a deeper meaning and fulfilment in our communities. They experience the mystery of God's love for them. Academics speak of a "quiet revival" of people turning to the catholic faith. Across our country we are seeing it.

May I also speak about some of the practical challenges we now face. You will see the increasing age profile of our priests. Many will soon retire. The Lord will provide sufficient priests, but we must pray for them. I invite us all to be intentional in praying daily for vocations to the priesthood. Our vocations team have produced parish prayer resources

which have been shared with our clergy, they will be on the diocesan website too. Please use them and pray for vocations.

The present offer of Sunday Masses is not sustainable. Priests are now stretched to the limit, if not overstretched. We must all accept pastoral changes are now necessary. Every priest may celebrate three Sunday Masses over the weekend. Masses must be arranged so that cover may be offered for vacations and sickness. The church's wisdom states that Mass is the gathering of the one community around one Altar celebrating the one Eucharist. More than one Mass should only really be considered if there is insufficient space to fit the people into the Church. That liturgical and pastoral principle has been lost for some time due to the number of priests we have had. However, the principle will necessarily become a guide once again as priest numbers reduce. It is time for some parishes to amalgamate, and this has the blessing of sharing resources more efficiently for mission.

A linked challenge is the number of churches and buildings we have and the condition of some of them. Our mission is the key. Our mission is to evangelise, be communities of prayer and worship, to form missionary disciples, to be a truly synodal church listening to one another, clergy and people working co-responsibly in serving our communities with social justice and compassion. Buildings, even our precious and beloved churches, are to serve the mission. If they don't then they become obstacles and very costly ones at that. Nobody takes any pleasure in raising this challenge, least of all me, but we must now face it. If we do not, then our human and financial resources will be lost to buildings, and we hand on the challenge to the next generation.

Many of our communities are already discerning these challenges with their clergy, and I thank you for this. Please continue. We need to ask, very honestly, what parish life will look like when fewer priests are available: how many Masses can realistically be celebrated, where priests will live, and how best to serve our communities to enable them to flourish. If we avoid these questions, we risk greater hurt later.

To guide this work, I have established a Pastoral Steering Group, which will meet for the first time in December. But this cannot be a top-down exercise. Synodality means that decisions must be shaped by local prayer, reflection, and dialogue. Final decisions rest with me, but they must be informed by discernment at parish, partnership, and deanery levels. To support that discernment, a Diocesan Discernment Pack will soon be available for every parish. It will help communities reflect on their mission, their resources, and the future. This work is essential, and it must begin or continue, now.

Christ is our hope, and the challenge is to be ready to meet Him in the years ahead. Please pray for our clergy, please pray for vocations and please be generous as we discern our readiness to meet the Lord in the years ahead.

With assurances of prayers,

+ Stephen

Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle