

Pastoral Letter for Advent 2021

At a time when so much in the world has been changing and unpredictable, the cycle of the Church's year provides us with the stability and comfort we greatly need, reminding us of the eternal promises of God and of the life and sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. Advent is one of those seasons of anticipation, offering us new hope and the eternal joy of the birth of the Christ-child come to save humanity. It is also traditionally a penitential time in the Church, reminding us of the end of the world and of the reasons why it was necessary that Christ should become man – because of the fallen and sinful nature of mankind that only Christ could redeem. As the hymnodist Charles Wesley wrote in the eighteenth-century, "God and sinners reconciled".

The turbulent circumstances of the world today have ultimately only one answer, and that is in our enduring relationship with God. In examining the response of the world to the challenges that we face, we should, as Christians, above all seek to be messengers of peace and understanding; to mirror the reconciliation that is at the heart of the sacrifice of Jesus. Where there is sickness, let us bring healing. But to do this, we must first understand the nature of the sickness, and where it is born of spiritual starvation, let us not be slow to identify the problem.

The ministry of Christians to the sick is one of the oldest of our traditions, and the modern practice of medicine has its antecedents in the skilled hospitality offered by monks and nuns in the past. We can achieve much through the advances of science. But let us not forget that science is a gift from God and never a substitute for Him. Only God is omniscient. Moreover, our relationship with God is not abstract and vague, it is personal and direct. As people of faith, we place our lives in God's service and seek to do His will without thought of self-interest. Too often, the world tells us that we should place self-interest and self-protection ahead of our duty to others and our duty to God's people; that we should, like the Jewish priest and the Levite, pass by the afflicted man on the road, rather than be the Good Samaritan who helps his neighbour even though there is conflict between their kin.

I do not say at all that we should not give thanks for the considerable work of the doctors, nurses and healthcarers of the world, but we should always temper medical advice with a wider awareness of our humanity. It is not merely humane, it is our duty as Christians to care for one another emotionally and to support each other as an active and involved community. We must not allow governmental restrictions imposed upon us to break our society apart by forcing our most vulnerable into isolation and loneliness. And we must fight to continue to support, by all means possible, our communities and to ensure that the sick and the suffering have not only medical but spiritual support available to them. Above all, we must ensure that the Sacraments, and in particular the Mass, remain central to our lives.

Consider if you will the experience of Europe during the time of plague in the fourteenth-century known as the Black Death. In those days, medicine was far

less advanced than today. Also, priests had a much more central role in their communities, being the most educated and the most trusted for advice on everything in life as well as in spiritual matters. There were priests who, faced with the pressures attending a disease that killed between 40 and 50 per cent of the European population, fled their posts and went into hiding. But most priests continued to administer the sacraments and support their communities with the reassurance of the promises of Jesus, that even at the end of our lives, we are not alone. They went into the sick-rooms of their parishioners unsure of what they would find and indeed around 40-50 per cent of priests went on to die from the Black Death. But their presence and the comfort that they brought to the suffering and the dying must have made a terrible situation more bearable for many, and ensured that those people were able to place their lives in the proper context of their relationship to God.

Not everyone felt like this, however. After the Black Death, there was a substantial reaction against the Church. There was a mistaken belief that the Christian faith would protect a person from illness, and that the ministrations of a priest had an effectively magical power to cure. When these things were seen not to be so, and when it was seen that priests themselves were dying in their thousands, many people questioned their faith.

Something like the same process has happened in our own time, though it has a longer and more complex antecedence. The world often holds up science as it once did faith, urging us to "trust the science". Yet this is a misunderstanding of both faith and science. Science is no more than a disciplined process of inquiry, in which knowledge is constantly questioned, tested and revised as new discoveries are made. It is never settled, and its practitioners are no more able to offer certainty in the face of unpredictable illness than are our priests. Rather than seeing it as faith, we would do better to see science as an ongoing revelation to mankind from God that helps us to understand better His creation. It is undoubtedly a blessing, but it is not infallible and it is never a magical process.

When we come to consider faith, we need to have a deeper understanding. Nowhere in the Scriptures are we told that the Christian life is easy or without suffering. There are many occasions in which we pray and receive answers – sometimes the ones we had asked for, sometimes others. Yet we never see the full picture – we can only see through a glass darkly. When we pray for deliverance from illness and our prayers are not answered as we would wish, and we see good people who we love suffer and die, it is easy and natural to direct our anger and hurt towards God, just as happened after the Black Death. And God is able to accept that and understand why we feel that way. Yet as we take a more mature view of life, we need to realise the inevitability of death and suffering as part of the lot of mankind. We need also to acknowledge our own vulnerability in the face of such an issue and come to an acceptance that it is God in charge, rather than us, and that while we know the essentials of His plan for us, we can never understand such issues fully. What can we do in such a situation, in which our powerlessness and inadequacies are all too clearly shown? The only thing we can ever do is to bring ourselves to

God in prayer, speaking to Him as naturally as if He were standing next to us, and pray that He will give to us and to those for whom we pray the things that we truly need, for he knows us better than we know ourselves.

What I have described is another sense in which Wesley's words about reconciliation between God and sinners come true. Where there are barriers between ourselves and God, we need to work at removing them. Grief, resentment and hurt are all barriers of this kind. As Advent comes again, we have an opportunity to consider how the breach between God and mankind was healed through innocence, purity and vulnerability in a newborn baby. The world before the first Christmas was mired in the darkness of sin and in desperate need of healing. The coming of Christ meant the ultimate in new hope. It is a hope that remains with us still today, and that can be born anew every year in our hearts. So let us embrace the true spirit of Christmas in drawing near to Jesus, in trusting Him and in becoming more effective vessels to do His will.

+JOHANNES EDMUNDUS