



**Pastoral Letter of the Bishop of Nottingham  
appointed to be read at all Masses  
on the Second Sunday of Advent,  
Saturday 7 / Sunday 8 December 2013**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Our latest gift from Pope Francis is a document called 'The Gospel of Joy'. It is an exhortation on the subject of evangelisation, namely how we can both announce the Good News of Jesus and live it, and so make his presence felt in the world of today. In it, the Pope encourages us to become missionary disciples – each and every one of us should freely share the gift of salvation that we have received, and we do this by living the Gospel daily.

Before all else, Pope Francis reminds us that to be a Christian is to be joyful, and the first effect of the Gospel in our lives should be one of joy. But what is this joy? There are many definitions of this word ranging from happiness to euphoria, but for Christians it has a special meaning: joy is receiving the mercy of God. This idea is a long way from many of the popular notions of joy, which confuse true happiness with pleasure.

At this time of year, we are subjected to intense advertising which suggest that happiness is achieved by buying expensive consumer goods and giving them as presents to one another, or by drinking and eating to excess at office parties. But we know deep in our hearts that true happiness comes from building strong and deep relationships with God, within our families, and with our friends and fellow parishioners. No amount of satisfaction of our perceived needs can compare to the delight that comes from being close to God and each other in Jesus Christ.

In a recent interview, Pope Francis tells us that: 'The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. And the ministers of the Church must be ministers of mercy above all.'

Pope Francis is telling us something very relevant to our situation today: we should be ministers of mercy. That is how we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. By being a people who live the love of Christ in an explicit way, we become ministers of mercy – and that applies to everyone; not just priests, deacons and religious, but to each and every one of us – we are all asked to be ministers of mercy.

Pope Francis' motto is one that we can all take to heart: it is *miserando atque eligendo*, which in English means 'by having mercy, and by choosing him'. It is taken from a homily of one of the great English saints, the Venerable Bede, on the call of Saint Matthew: 'Jesus saw the tax collector and by having mercy chose him as an Apostle saying to him: Follow me.' Matthew, whose Gospel we began reading again this Advent, had thought that happiness lay in getting rich by collecting taxes for the Roman occupiers of Israel. However, by showing Matthew mercy and calling him, Jesus showed him that a deep joy was possible, but could only be achieved by being freed from this mentality of looking out just for ourselves. In following Jesus, Matthew left behind his past life and found something which was much more rewarding – the deep joy of being a disciple of Jesus.

Because the Lord has chosen us in his mercy, we should adopt that attitude towards others. The joy of receiving salvation should be the defining characteristic of a Christian and it is something that can only bring a deep sense of happiness, both to the giver and the recipient.

The season of Advent is a season of preparation, not just for our annual celebration of the Lord's Birth at Christmas, but of his coming in glory at the end of time. It is a season of preparation to be happy and joyful, since true happiness needs careful planning.

If we are to welcome Jesus at Christmas, it is essential that we become aware of the things in our lives that hold us back from recognising him and being close to him, and letting them go. By heeding the call of Saint John the Baptist in today's Gospel, we can prepare a way for the Lord and make his paths straight, so that we can welcome Jesus into our hearts. By doing this, we can become people who can warm the hearts of those we meet.

Our relationship with Jesus, which for each of us is very personal, can be deepened by prayer, the sacrament of reconciliation and above all by our celebration of Mass and reception of the Blessed Eucharist. This relationship is important not only for ourselves but for others. If we are to bring joy to others, then we have to be filled with the joy of the Gospel ourselves – and the joy of the Gospel is contagious!

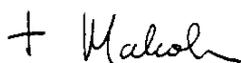
It is very fortunate for us that God chose to come to us as a child. Pope Benedict once said, 'God made himself small, so that we could understand him, welcome him and love him'. How can we resist these feelings of love and care when we see the face of the child in the manger? But we should also remember that this is a child who cries the cry of the needy and poor. He is a child who was born in difficult circumstances and soon becomes a refugee to avoid the slaughter of innocent children.

That is why a deep relationship with Jesus compels us to live the Gospel to the full and become peacemakers, reconcilers and people who work for justice. Living the life of Jesus Christ means identifying ourselves with the poor, the marginalised and those whom others reject, whoever they may be, offering a new vision by giving faith to the faithless, hope to the hopeless and love to the loveless. In the small acts of kindness which we can do for one another, we can make the world around us a more decent place; we proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ by living the deep joy of Christian discipleship.

Let me finish this letter by passing on to you an invitation from Pope Francis, and inviting you to read his exhortation for yourselves this Advent – it can be downloaded from the diocesan website or purchased from the Catholic Truth Society. The Pope says:

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since 'no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord'.

May the joy of the Gospel fill your hearts this Advent, and I hope that you and your families and friends will have a blessed and holy Christmas.



Right Reverend Malcolm McMahon OP  
Bishop of Nottingham



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**December 2013**