



**Pastoral letter to be read at all Masses on the
Third Sunday of Advent 2008
14 December 2008**

Today's Mass begins with the antiphon, *'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice!* You may well ask what is there to rejoice about.

We are experiencing a down turn in the economy which is affecting many of us in different ways. In our diocese, many of our communities, which have not fully recovered from previous economic setbacks and closure of industries, are now facing a further threat of unemployment. The lack of respect for human life, especially for the unborn, continues to be supported by legislation. Our brave service men and women are involved in armed conflict overseas with little hope of returning soon. Christmas is less than two weeks away, and the prospect is looking rather glum for many families.

When St Paul, wrote these words of encouragement to the Christians at Philippi in Macedonia he was in prison, and his future was none too bright. He had suffered greatly in answer to the Lord's call yet he thought it all worthwhile. Elsewhere, he says that he is content with weakness and hardship, for the sake

of Christ, *'for when I am weak, then I am strong.'* (2 Corinthians 12:10)

We are in the middle of the Year of St Paul declared by Pope Benedict on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul to run until the next feast day on 29 June 2009. Ostensibly this is to commemorate the 2000th anniversary of St. Paul's birth but it is also an inspired call for every one of us to look again at the teaching of the Apostle. There could not have been a more timely call to the essentials of the Gospel than at this time of economic recession. St Paul knows what it is like to reach rock bottom, and yet he can still call on Christians to rejoice.

St Paul's Gospel can be summed up in four simple words about our Lord: died, buried, raised and appeared. (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3-5) Those four words tell us so much about Jesus. If He died then He must have been born. Therefore, He was human just like us. He was buried, so He truly died and yet He was raised from the dead, and there was no doubt about it because He appeared; first to Peter, then to the twelve apostles, to many others and at last to Paul. There can be no doubt about that. This is the rock on which our faith and that of St Paul is founded. It sustained St Paul through a tough time, and it will help us too.

St Paul also made it clear that he was not making up this good news. He had received it himself and that he was passing it on to others. He says, *'What I have delivered to you, I also received'*. We too are links in that chain of handing on our faith. We received our belief in Jesus Christ as Catholics from our parents and

grandparents or from close friends or perhaps by coming to a sudden realisation of the truth of the Gospel. But whatever way we received it, we got it from someone who received it from someone else going right back to the first apostles and the early Church. That process has a name and it is tradition. Tradition in a Christian sense is a living thing. It not only looks back to happier days, it looks forward too.

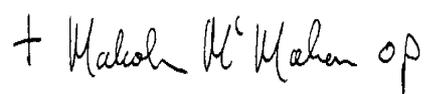
In what sense is Christmas traditional? Of course, it is traditional in the secular sense of the word. We all enjoy the old films on the television, the special food and the festivity that accompany the feast. It is a time for families, too and that will enable us to welcome back to Church our friends and family who have got stuck regarding their beliefs and practice. You may be able to gently remind them that they have received this gift of the Gospel, and that they are a link in the chain. If they do not hand on their faith to their children and friends two thousand years of tradition will stop with them. What a responsibility to bear!

Now is the time to use our Christian tradition properly and not to confuse it with other traditions. The Christmas Crib will be taken out of the box where it has been stored with the tinsel and the decorations for the Christmas tree. But give your Crib a place of honour in your home – do not fit it in between a plastic Father Christmas and a cuddly reindeer. Our Christmas Crib may evoke warm childhood memories but it is also a challenging way in which we can hand on our faith to our children and friends without saying too much. The poverty of the Crib, Joseph and Mary without proper shelter, the enduring value of family life,

Jesus' first months as a refugee in Egypt all speak for themselves. The coming of the Magi also lifts our spirits and turns our thoughts to the future because the child Jesus is worshipped as King. His power over sin and death is thus foreshadowed. The reason that God showed his love for us in Jesus is so that we too might have hope, and that we will be led from darkness into light.

I am quite aware that the following months will be very testing for so many people, yet I do believe that this Christmas can be a special time for deepening of our love of Jesus. It can become an occasion for sharing our faith with others who do not know Jesus and an opportunity to call back those who have stopped going to church. For every one of us it can be a chance to look again at what we consider to be important in our lives and to put our love of God and neighbour before ourselves. I know that we will be happier for it, and then we can heed the words of St Paul and truly rejoice.

Wishing you a holy Christmas and a blessed new year,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Malcolm McMahon OP". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Rt Rev Malcolm McMahon OP
Bishop of Nottingham

*Bishop's House
Nottingham*

November 2008