

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

*When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all men to myself.*

Every Lent is a pilgrimage of faith when we try to come closer to the Lord through our prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Although we may be unable to travel on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, we can still make a journey of faith in our innermost heart.

The story-telling of the Scriptures enables us to imagine ourselves accompanying Our Lord and through the power of the sacramental action during each Mass we are truly present with the Lord at his Last Supper and we witness his sacrifice on Calvary.

Today we begin the final two weeks of Lent and enter into Passiontide, when our thoughts turn more and more to the sacrifice Our Lord made on the Cross for our sake. At this stage on our journey through Lent we try to renew our efforts to be more prayerful, to make other people's wellbeing our priority and to be generous to those who are in need.

In our undertakings of prayer, fasting and almsgiving we are also imitating the Lord in his forty days in the desert.

In prayer we come face-to-face with God, in fasting we confront the reality in our own lives and in almsgiving we see more clearly the needs of others – in these three ways we pray that we may continue to bear good fruit this Lent.

Today's Gospel is a demonstration of the love of God that inspires and sustains us during Lent and that compels us to draw others into the presence of Christ.

Today's reading from St John's Gospel tells us that a group of Greek people asked if they could see Jesus and immediately Philip and Andrew went to discuss this request with Our Lord himself. The apostles were moved by what they heard – we should like to see Jesus – and they were persuaded to take this request directly to Jesus for his response.

We notice that the apostles first listened to the Greek searchers who had been inspired by the Holy Spirit and then they acted. In this we can see a

reflection of the Synodal Pathway that Pope Francis has called the Church to follow.

So that we may ourselves move from collaboration to co-responsibility in the same spirit I am asking every parish and deanery in our Archdiocese – through the parish priests and the deans – to establish pastoral councils.

Whether in individual parishes, working closely with our schools, or groups of parishes working in clusters together, as well as in our deaneries, pastoral councils can focus and motivate the Body of Christ for mission, with the Diocesan Vision as our guide.

These future gatherings of clergy and lay faithful, assisted by the prayers and participation of our Religious and our school communities, will pray and reflect together about the local mission of the Church. They will act as consultative bodies, informing and guiding the decisions that need to be taken as we look to the future.

Thus they will help us prepare for a closer working together of neighbouring parishes, with the likelihood of fewer clergy, the possible merger of parishes and the likely need to close some of our churches in the years ahead. Through our baptism we all have a share in the Priesthood of Christ and that invests in all of us a responsibility for the future of the Church.

Where deanery pastoral councils do not already exist I am now asking that they should be created. Over the coming weeks further guidelines will be provided to enable these pastoral councils to be established in the coming months – with due respect for the particular nature, the pastoral priorities and the achievements of the parishes and deaneries they will serve. Whatever the context, our shared goal is to see the Diocesan Vision become a reality.

I would also like to thank those parishes and deaneries where pastoral councils, or their equivalent, have already been established or where they have been active and fruitful for many years. Their experience and example can act as a welcome encouragement to others.

In his response to Philip and Andrew Our Lord is conscious of his mission to reach out to all people with the Good News – he is also conscious of the sacrifice of love that he must make for them.

When I am lifted up, I shall draw all men to myself. In a few days' time we shall once again remember the shadows of Calvary and the sign of the Cross which is Jesus' triumph over sin and death. Like Philip and Andrew, we need to help others to see the Cross of Christ as the sign of God's love for them.

This Lent we should look about us and recognise the ways that active and sacrificial Christian love is already at work in our parish communities. Then we can try to make our own contribution to this treasury of love – to be the Philips and Andrews, the Marthas and Marys of today, drawing close to the Lord ourselves and bringing others with us.

This weekend we also ask for the intercession of St Patrick – the patron saint of Ireland and of Nigeria – and I offer my thanks for the longstanding work and witness of clergy, Religious, families and individuals from Ireland, and more recently from Nigeria, in so many of the parishes and chaplaincies of the Archdiocese.

May Christ our Saviour guide us as we seek to do his will – and may he sustain us throughout the coming days of Passiontide and Holy Week until we come to celebrate together the joy of Easter.

Yours devotedly in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "+ Bernard". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The plus sign is small and positioned to the left of the name. The name "Bernard" is written in a large, elegant script.

Bernard Longley

Archbishop of Birmingham