

Richard



Bishop of Arundel & Brighton

PASTORAL MESSAGE TO THE WEYBRIDGE DEANERY
for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
31st January 2016

Dear brothers and sisters in Weybridge Deanery,

It is perhaps unusual for a Bishop to send a pastoral message to only one deanery, but I would like to address a few words to you today about a conversation that has been taking place in the deanery for the last two years or so – a conversation about the Mission of the Church. Part of this conversation does concern the fact that the priests of the diocese are not getting any younger. In future years we shall have fewer priests in our Diocese. That does not mean we have a shortage of priests, for we are in a country where the ratio of priests to people will continue to be one of the highest in the world.

However, I believe very strongly that we are at a good moment for the Church, a moment when – as Pope Francis reminds us – we are all called to discipleship, to be a Church of Missionary Disciples. We are being called to reach out beyond our buildings and structures. This will demand some new ways of thinking too and since I arrived in the Diocese last year, I have been underlining these three priorities: Mission, Formation for Mission and Prayer as the essential support for Mission.

In today's first reading we hear God addressing the prophet Jeremiah: *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you; I have appointed you as prophet to the nations."*¹ Jeremiah lived in very difficult times – not unlike our own in some ways - and these words gave him the courage and strength for the call that God had given him. Those words to Jeremiah are equally true for every one of us. Our baptism calls each of us to be disciples and the profound confidence we see in Jeremiah is ours too.

The text from today's Gospel is very powerful indeed. We can sense the eager anticipation in the air as Jesus reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah: *"This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen."*² The people are delighted – yet challenged at the same time as Jesus reminds them that his Father has so often revealed himself to the outsider. We have the same experience ourselves if we really engage prayerfully with God's Word – utter delight and wonder at its promise and relevance and struggle with its demands and its unsettling quality. Everything is seen differently once we've learnt to see the world with the eyes of Christ, so I invite you to open mind and heart in a new way to the Word of God.

¹ Jer. 1:5.

² Lk. 4:21.

We must, as St. Paul reminds us, *“Be ambitious for the higher gifts.”*³ Our Catholic Faith is the most wonderful gift – but it is so much more than a label, a brand – something that we bring off the shelf on a Sunday morning. No, it is a relationship with the One who is Life. Being a disciple means that we are sent into the community to share faith, to give grounds for hope and to sow seeds of love – to call others into relationship with Christ in the community of His Church.

So, like Jeremiah, we can be confident. With the people in the synagogue, we can be excited and challenged. With St. Paul, we can be ambitious. We have so much for which to be grateful – for the formation we have received in our homes, our schools, our parish communities; for the wonderful gift of the Sacraments; for the experience of prayer that sustains us each day.

But we must ask questions too: How can we become better witnesses to Christ? What is needed now and what is our witness to those who come after us, too? How can we work with our neighbouring parishes to support each other in ministry? How can we work more efficiently, sharing resources and planning together? How can we all contribute to the life of our communities – and to sharing that life with those outside our doors? And what formation and support do we need to put in place, so that we can be faithful to our calling, as Jeremiah was faithful to his calling?

I want you all to take part in that conversation – as *‘Weybridge Deanery, planning for mission together’*. There is a meeting at the Highfield Road Sixth Form Centre of Salesian School in Chertsey next Saturday morning, drawing together priests and people from every one of our parishes in the deanery. This will be the beginning of the conversation we need to have, in every parish and in every home. We live in changing times, but as Blessed John Henry Newman once wrote: *“To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.”* Let’s not be afraid of change, then. Let’s recognise the opportunity that it holds for us.

I take this opportunity to thank everyone who has done so much to build up the communities of the Deanery, often over a lifetime. I want to thank your clergy, who serve you so faithfully and generously. I want to thank those many people who work quietly and faithfully, year-in and year-out, to teach faith, to prepare liturgy, to reach out to those in need in the local community, to do all those tasks that make your parishes and deanery what they are. But now it’s time to spread those tasks more widely, to draw more people into building your community’s future.

We prayed, in today’s Psalm: *“It is you, O Lord, who are my hope, my trust, O Lord, since my youth ... My lips will tell of your justice and day by day of your help.”*⁴ We can be courageous, since we trust in the Lord. We are a faithful people. Let us be prayerful, ambitious and creative in planning the way ahead, so that, as true disciples of Christ, we shall be effective in our mission together.

With every Blessing,



Bishop of Arundel & Brighton

³ 1 Cor. 12:31.

⁴ Ps. 70:5.