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Pastoral Letter for the First Sunday of Advent 1st December 2024 **The Holy Year - Pilgrims of Hope**

We begin the Season of Advent and so a new Church Year. A new beginning is the new translation of the Scriptures which we proclaim and listen to at Mass. Biblical scholarship never stands still and this fresh translation, faithful to the original Greek and Hebrew, offers us new insights into familiar texts. You will notice occasional rewording. When we do, please see them as invitations to reflect again on what the Lord is saying to us in His Holy Word. As today's psalm prays:

*O Lord teach me your ways. Teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me.
(Ps 25:4-5)*

This Year we will celebrate a Holy Year, a Jubilee Year. Pope Francis asks that it begins on the Sunday after Christmas, the Feast of the Holy Family. On that Sunday I will celebrate Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral, Newcastle and then later at St. Joseph's Church, Hartlepool and open the Holy Doors at both churches. I thank all who will volunteer to help pilgrims through the Year. Please do consider volunteering. The Holy Year will then run until the Feast of the Epiphany in January 2026, when the Holy Doors are closed. The theme of the Holy Year is "Pilgrims of Hope." We are invited to be pilgrims of true Hope and share it with others.

So why a Holy Year? Its origins go back to Old Testament traditions. The seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest from work. In the seventh-year land was left fallow to recover. A sabbath for the land. Seven sabbaths for the land was the forty ninth year. The next year, the fiftieth year was declared a year of Jubilee. Debts were cancelled, land restored to original owners, slaves and prisoners set free. Poverty in the community was addressed. It was a year of restoration, justice, freedom and celebration. The Jubilee Year was certainly a radical act of social justice in the community. But it was not simply a political or social act. Primarily it was an act of prayer and worship followed by service. The people received the unmerited gifts of the justice, forgiveness and restoration from God. Then having received those gifts they shared them with others. To this day, the Church's social teaching and action depends on Her faith in the holiness, mercy and compassion of God. Social action not rooted in faith will become distorted.

Since the year 1300, the Catholic Church has celebrated Holy or Jubilee Years. More recently they are celebrated every twenty – five years. You may recall the last Holy Year in the Year 2000 and St. Pope John Paul II's plea that developing countries debt be forgiven and cancelled. That concerted effort had very positive results. Sadly, we are back where we were. The Church continues to advocate those crippling debts, often owed to financial institutions are justly managed. If you would like more information about this global problem and campaign, then please visit the CAFOD website.

Closer to home, what is the meaning of the Jubilee for us? What is a Pilgrim of Hope?

People of a certain age will remember the old Catechism teaching: "What is Hope? Hope is a supernatural gift of God, by which we firmly trust that God will give us eternal life and all means necessary to obtain it, if we do what he requires of us." Hope is a gift we can accept or reject. Let us

open our hearts and receive it. We need it. There are many challenges in life at home and abroad. War, famine, climate change, cost of living pressures, an increase in divisions in society, often fuelled by prejudice and intolerance of the other. The dignity of every human person is not recognised as human life is seen as cheap and disposable.

Jesus teaches us that times may be like that in the apocalyptic imagery in the Gospel. But he also assures us the Son of Man is present amid all the troubles.

Straighten up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near... stay awake at all times praying that you may have the strength to escape... to stand before the Son of Man. (Lk 21: 28,36)

Hope is the key. As Pilgrims of Hope we try to get the perspective right. Hope is not the last resort, like the suffering fan at the football stadium, one nil down in the ninetieth minute. All else has failed so let's just hope. That is not Christian Hope, it is either optimism or despair depending on which team you follow. True Hope is a confidence in the Lord who brings life from death, a Lord who loves and saves us. Hope holds on to the knowledge of God's final victory. All ends well because all ends in God. Hope never loses sight of the eternal life won for us all in Christ's Death and Resurrection. Hope also never forgets God's presence with us even now, however bad things may seem. God is with us, and none of our efforts are lost. In that perspective we face the many challenges in life, at home and abroad. Because of Hope we can serve others. We must not be passive. Hope is a gift to be used for others. As St Paul encourages us today:

May the Lord make you increase and abound in your love for one another and for all. (1Thess 3:12)

So why the Holy Doors? The image is a simple but profound one. It signifies our entry into Heaven, we pray. One day we will meet the Lord face to face. We will meet His love, compassion and mercy. A pilgrimage to the Holy Doors is a profound act of faith and hope in the Lord. We are invited to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation at that time or at another time, taking to heart the forgiveness of the Lord. An Indulgence awaits us. Language that can be misunderstood. However, I like the simplicity that our loving Heavenly Father wishes to indulge us, to be even more generous in His love and giving. What loving parent would not want to be as generous as they can be to their children? So much more generous is Our Father in Heaven.

The spirituality of Advent is a time of expectant Joy and Hope. We are waiting to meet the Lord when He comes again at the end of time, when he comes to us at Christmas and as always as he comes to us here and now in the Mass. This Advent we have another spiritual dimension, the expectant Joy and Hope of the Holy Year beginning after Christmas. We will have opportunities to grow in faith, to encounter Christ, to walk with one another. Further information about the Holy Year will follow inviting us to come together as pilgrims, celebrating our Jubilee.

The psalmist prays, *For you are the God of my salvation. (Ps25:5)*

That is our Hope, written on our hearts. In the Holy Year may we all receive the gift of true Hope and share it with others.

With assurances of prayers

✠ Bishop Stephen