



**Pastoral Letter
Third Sunday of Advent
12 December 2021
On Expectation**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

On this Third Sunday of Advent, the Scriptures we have just listened to together are bursting with joy and excitement. As winter begins to take hold, and calling to mind the many challenges we are dealing with in our world at this time, these biblical sentiments may not always suit our mood. And so we need to dig a little deeper. The prophet Zephaniah proclaimed the Lord's victory over everything which robbed the people of God of their faith. He lived in a world of political turmoil seven centuries before Christ. And perhaps the people of Judah had lost faith and had become despondent. Against this spiritual darkness, the prophet invites those who listen to him to find light within praise and exultation.

The apostle Paul echoes this sense of exultation. In his Letter to the Christian community in Philippi, Paul encourages those who have come to faith in Christ to be happy. The word he uses suggests something more than a passive state of mood. Paul invites disciples of Jesus to rejoice. Rejoicing is an active response to what the Lord has done. And the apostle suggests, we have to guard our hearts and minds if we are going to be able to rejoice. All this is quite remarkable when we call to mind, Paul was imprisoned when he wrote these words, awaiting trial and execution.

And so to the Gospel. We find ourselves in a desert place, and yet there is much life in the witness and teaching of John the Baptist. Those who come to John have open minds and hearts. This is summed up in a Gospel word we heard, expectancy. So let's cut to the chase. The expectancy of those responding to the Baptist's ministry is misplaced. They are beginning to think he might be the Messiah. Let us listen again to what this great prophet proclaims about the Christ: 'he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire'. There is something rather challenging about all this. Are we are caught up with the question of those people listening to John, 'what must we do?' Are we so preoccupied with what we might be doing, that we have stopped remembering what the Lord has done?

In these days, the Church is preparing for the next Synod, which is entitled, *For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission*. We are trying

to listen graciously to what is being hopefully graciously spoken. And over the past few months, some of you have shared with me something of your expectations. Some have very little expectation of the synodal journey, either because of indifference, or fear of what may develop from the consultation. Others have their own personal expectations. It could be said of many, 'a feeling of expectancy had grown among the people'. But where is this expectancy rooted? Does it lie in our own likes and dislikes, our own preferences?

For my part, baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire involves allowing the Lord to change my mind, to conform my mind to his mind. Earlier in the Letter to the Philippians, St Paul writes this, 'Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.' If we are to see all things new in Christ, this will involve having the courage to abandon ourselves into a mindset which empties and humbles ourselves, even to a sharing in the cross which embraces the true mind of Jesus.

As we continue our Advent journey, I want to encourage us all to become a people of expectation. Given what our world has journeyed through in the past few years, there is an understandable weariness within our society. Within this setting, we can be warmed by the fire of the Holy Spirit at work in our Church, within our parish communities. Let us make our own, the Prayer for the Synod, which has these words,

Let us find in You our unity
so that we may journey together
to eternal life and not stray
from the way of truth and what is right.

And may I take this opportunity to wish you and your family a very blessed and peaceful Christmas celebration.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

✠ David

Bishop of Northampton

Given at Northampton on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

and appointed to be read or distributed in all churches and chapels of the Diocese on the Third Sunday of Advent, 11th and 12th December, 2021