

LIVERPOOL ARCHDIOCESAN CENTRE FOR EVANGELISATION

From the Press Officer:

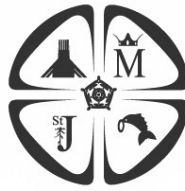
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PASTORAL LETTER

***To be read in all churches and chapels of the Archdiocese of Liverpool on
Sunday, 30 December 2007, the Feast of the Holy Family.***

My dear People,

Be attentive; be observant; see; listen; watch. I know there is much more to following Jesus than that. But it is a good place to start. Jesus observed, noticed, watched, listened. Recall stories: tiny seeds; foxes; watching leaven as his Mother baked bread; or the master structural engineer and carpenter, called Joseph, preparing sound foundations or delicately carving a yoke to fit a particular ox. Widows; wedding feasts, children's songs and games; wheat; weeds; red sunsets, red sunrises; clouds in the West; table-manners; lilies; sparrows; serpents; doves. The list could go on for quite some time. To watch, to see, to observe, to listen, is to begin to be like Jesus.

He was much closer to the earth than you and I will ever be; when he gave thanks before food and drink, no one forgot what it was like. I doubt if anyone ever notices that in me. It pained him when people spoke lightly of earth or sky. They were the wonders of his Father, never to be taken for granted.

Just at the time I began to understand this about our Lord, I read two books: one about William Shakespeare; one about Charles Dickens: both made the same point: William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens were massively observant. And without realising that we will never appreciate how they wrote so vividly; it was not eloquence, or cleverness with words: it began with being attentive, observant, watching, listening, seeing. They saw things as if for the first time. It is also true: what makes someone a prophet, someone with something worthwhile to say, is not eloquence, but vision.

Simeon was a prophet: he saw in the frail, helpless child, the healing, saving, blessed presence of God. And I just wonder if one challenge of our age is: does surfing the web enable us to see or to be distracted from what is under our nose? Are we attentive, or just flitting from one thing to another, not really observing, listening, hearing, watching; but rushing by.

Allow me to give some examples of those who saw: it is what poets do. Since the word of God today invited us to face up to old age and to watch a child, an old man and an old woman, let's begin with this from 'As You Like it' by William Shakespeare:

'All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
The whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like a leopard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation.
Even in the canon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good chicken lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise sayings and modern instance;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
To end this strange eventful history
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans every thing.'

A second opening of our eyes by a great writer: in the coming months once more the dignity, wonder, of the unborn child, and the wretchedness which is uttered far too briefly in the word of abortion; please receive this account by George Eliot in her book 'Adam Bede' of Hetty Sorrell: Hetty is engaged to be married to Adam. But she is carrying in her womb the child of Arthur Dennithorne the local lord of the manor. Just listen and allow your heart to be deeply moved with compassion.

'Poor wandering Hetty, with the rounded childish face and the hard, unloving, despairing soul looking out of it, with the narrow heart and narrow thoughts, no room in them for any sorrows but her own, and tasting that sorrow with the more intense bitterness! My heart bleeds for her as I see her toiling along on her weary feet, or seated in a cart, with her eyes fixed vacantly on the road before her, never thinking or caring whither it tends, till hunger comes and makes her desire that a village may be near.

What will be the end, the end of her objectless wandering, apart from all love, caring for human beings only through her pride, clinging to life only as the hunted wounded brute clings to it?

God preserve you and me from being the beginnings of such misery!

And to lead to one last example: this is how Jane Austen once described her writing when her nephew Edward suggested they might write a novel together: 'What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited sketches, full of variety and glow? How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush as to produce little effect after much labour.' Few now know about Edward Austen, but still films are made of the works of Jane who hardly travelled at all, but she watched, listened, noticed, heard. And so her small piece of ivory, worked on with a fine brush lives on.

No need to surf the net, because it is there in front of us as the Preston poet Francis Thompson assures us in this poem:

'O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The eagle plunge to find the air
That we ask of the stars in motion
If they have rumour of thee there?

Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars!
The drift of pinions would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

The angels keep their ancient places; -
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
'tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,
the miss the many-splendoured thing.

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry, and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched between heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
Cry, clinging heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walking on the water,
not of Gennesareth, but Thames.'

Or to put it another way: the Word has become flesh and dwells among us: observe; be attentive; listen; watch; hear; see: and this shall be a wonder-filled year.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patrick Kelly". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P'.

Archbishop of Liverpool

**Ends
30 December 2007**