

Diocese of Hallam

Pastoral Letter

To be read at all Masses
On the weekend of the First Sunday of Advent 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

Today, we begin our preparations to celebrate, once again, the Christmas story. It is the story that marks the beginning of our salvation. At Christmas, we recall and give thanks for that moment in history when our God stooped down to meet us in the guise of a vulnerable child.

In his Christmas Novena, St Alphonsus describes this moment in these words:

Behold, then, the Immensity becomes an infant, whom the heavens cannot contain: see him imprisoned in his poor rags and laid in a narrow manger on a bundle of straw which was at once his only bed and pillow.

On Christmas Eve 1223, Francis of Assisi was determined to give the people of his town an experience of the first Christmas. So, he assembled a cast of people and animals and arranged them in a cave in the small Italian town of Greccio. From that day, the Crib has been at the heart of the liturgical and devotional life of Christian families at Christmas time. Children love to re-tell the story for us. In our churches and homes, the figures of the Holy Family, the shepherds, the Magi and the animals tell the story in picture and colour for all to see.

This Christmas, as always, the crib will be placed in a prominent place in our churches. In previous years, it has provided a special focus for our prayer. As individuals and families, we have gathered before the child in the crib and lingered awhile in prayer; perhaps to take a moment to give thanks for graces and blessings received or maybe to petition the infant before us on behalf of the family, of the church, of the world.

This Christmas, when you come to celebrate Mass and visit the crib, covid-19 restrictions will mean that it is not possible to linger before the crib as in previous years.

This Christmas then, perhaps, we are being asked to do something different, namely, to find a special place for the crib in our homes along with all the decorations, lights and tree.

This year, it is in the home that we are invited to find the time and space as family or individual members to pray before the scene that recreates for us the beginning of the story of our salvation.

This year, it is in the home that we are invited to pray in thanksgiving for faith, family and friends.

This year, it is in the home that we are invited to linger before the Holy Family with the prayers and petitions that are urgently on our minds and in our hearts in a wave of prayer and supplication.

This year is a moment for us to create in our homes a little Church of the Nativity.

We are not quite sure yet what Christmas will look like this year, but we do know that it is likely that it will be like no other in living memory. However, there is no reason why it cannot be better than any other in living memory, if our minds and hearts are fixed on the child "laid in a narrow manger on a bundle of straw" and the truth, he reveals to us: our God Emmanuel. Our God has been with us in the darkest days of 2020 and now His light is being brought to bear on us as we look to 2021.

With my prayers for a blessed Advent and Christmastide and health in 2021.

Yours sincerely in Christ, the Redeemer,

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