2nd Sunday in Advent 2023

On Christmas Day 1914, in the first year of the First World War, the soldiers in the opposing armies refused to fire on one another. Instead, they walked out into “no man’s land” to sing Christmas carols. Acknowledging their common humanity, they exchanged rations and cigarettes. It was their tribute to the Christ child, the “Prince of Peace”. The following Christmas, in 1915, the military authorities were ready for the first sign of “fraternization”, and when a soldier tried to repeat the Christmas truce he was shot - by his own officers!

Like those soldiers in 1914, we too are preparing our tribute to the Christ child, he who declared*, “I have come that they may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10).* This weekend, as in previous years, we mark “Day for Life”. It is a time of prayer that our society will respect, protect, love, and serve life, from the moment of conception until its natural end. We see and hear, on news reports day-after-day, the savage hatred that divides so many peoples around the world. The conflict in Ukraine, the horrifying attack on the Kibbutz on 7th October last, and the catastrophic war being waged in Gaza, weigh particularly heavily on us at this time – to such an extent that many can hardly bear to watch the daily news. We feel so helpless in the face of such appalling suffering, especially that of innocent children – with Pope Francis we can only cry out, “May God have mercy on us”.

War and terrorism are obviously an appalling threat to life, but there are other serious threats of which we must also be aware: the deliberate destruction of innocent life in the womb; the heartless exploitation of migrants by people-traffickers, with the tragic loss of life in the cruel sea; the elderly and sick deemed to be a burden on society; humanity’s predatory relationship with nature, resulting in natural disasters and famines, most frequently in the least developed countries of the world. Again, we can only cry out, “May God have mercy on us, and on our world!”.

In his recent intervention at the COP 28 Meeting in Dubai Pope Francis made this heartfelt appeal: “I am with you to raise the question which we must answer now: Are we working for a culture of life or a culture of death? To all of you I make this heartfelt appeal: Let us choose life! Let us choose the future! May we be attentive to the cry of the earth, may we hear the plea of the poor, may we be sensitive to the hopes of the young and the dreams of children! We have a grave responsibility: to ensure that they not be denied their future”.

We read in the first book of the Bible how Cain, after he had killed his brother Abel, was asked by God, *“What have you done?” (Gen. 4:10).* There has never been a more sombre question, made even more sombre as God says, *“Listen to the sound of your brother’s blood, crying out to me from the ground” (ibid).* As we look upon our world suffering from the dire assaults on the sanctity of life, on human dignity, and upon mother earth itself, we must hear in the depths of our conscience that very same question, *“What have you done?.* It serves to remind us of the inviolability of life, because life always remains the property and gift of God the Creator and Father *(cf EV 40).*

When society fails to acknowledge the worth of the human embryo, the cry of the poor, the migrant, the displaced, and the cry of ravished nature, it is out of touch with those basic moral ideals that make it truly human. However, at the same time, we must also humbly recognise that this world, out of harmony with itself and its Creator, is reflected within each one of us. Such a lack of harmony is often experienced as a dull ache, or as a sense emptiness, in our inner being, indicating that all is not well.

But we are not alone: the prophet, Isaiah, cries out to us from the first reading: *“Here is the Lord coming with power...gathering lambs in his arms!”* And the Lord does gather us into his arms, in a particularly loving way, in the Sacrament of Penance. Confession is not something we do, but allow the Lord to do for us. It is not a harrowing of our lives, or the miserable poking through a “laundry list” of failures. It is simply the holding out of empty hands to receive the fullness of life. It is acknowledging that we are lacking in love, and mean in our response to love. It is hearing the voice of Jesus, through the Church, say, *“I have come that you may have life and have it to the full”*. It is true, he simply longs to gather us into his arms. Such is his love!

*“Let us see, O Lord, your mercy*

*and give us peace of heart.”* **Amen.**