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**Pastoral Letter to be read
on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday 2015
Sunday, 15th February 2015**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The recent and on-going crisis of the Ebola virus in Africa, the scourge of Aids, and to a lesser extent the fear of bird flu a few years ago, perhaps can give us some insight into the plight of the person with leprosy, mentioned in today's readings from the Book of Leviticus and in the Gospel of Mark. In Old Testament times leprosy inspired fear and dread, and those suffering from it who were isolated and cut off from their communities. Perhaps that's why, over the centuries, leprosy was used as a metaphor for sin. Pope Francis uses a different image which he calls "spiritual destitution". *"If we think we don't need God who reaches out to us through Christ, because we believe we can make it on our own, we are headed for a fall."* And that way of putting it perhaps reminds us of the 'fall' of Adam and Eve which disrupted the harmonious relationship between God and humankind. It was then that God took the initiative, because only God could restore that relationship, because God alone can truly save us and free us from sin. And that he did when in due time, he sent his only-begotten Son, to become one like us in everything but sin. He came to heal a broken and fragile humanity, and that he continues to do through the gift of the Holy Spirit and the sacraments of the Church.

Those readings and metaphors are a fruitful basis for our thinking and reflection as we approach the Season of Lent, which begins next Wednesday. We cannot transform and change our lives for the better without God's help, and if we think we can, then we are deluding ourselves. And we also need good friends to accompany us on our journey of faith, and to encourage us to seek God's help. We are all in some way or other subject to incapacity, whether through sin and selfishness, or simply human weakness and fragility. If our lives are to be transformed and renewed, then we need the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the support and encouragement of each other.

Lent offers us once again an opportunity to reflect upon the very heart of Christian life: God loves you and me with a steadfast and unconditional love, and he asks us to love him and our neighbour in return. Lent is a favourable time to renew our journey of faith, both as individuals and as a community, with the help of the word of God and the sacraments, and especially during this season with the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is a journey marked by prayer, fasting and almsgiving; three of the principal ways that help us grow in our love for God and for our brothers and sisters, especially the poor and the isolated.

This special time is given to us by the Church to help us in preparing to celebrate the Paschal Mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ - the great feast of Easter - in just over six weeks' time. During this time the Church exhorts us to get to know God better, and to get to know ourselves better too! He wants us to "incarnate", to embody, that love and compassion in our relationships with one another and to express it in a practical way, particularly to those who are in any kind of need. He commands us to use generously the gifts and talents we have received from the Holy Spirit for the building up of the community of his Church; to help build that communion of love, compassion and mercy, which reflects the very life of the Trinity.

My experience over the years is that in order to do as the Lord asks of me, my heart must be united with his heart; I must come to know him more deeply, and abide with him day by day with ever greater commitment. Lent is that "favourable time" for me to ask myself some searching questions about where I stand with God, and how I am responding to the commission He has given to all of us who are baptised. I cannot do that fruitfully unless I become more attentive to the word of God in the scriptures and through spending time each day in prayer. I cannot, from my own resources, produce the fruit that will last, unless I allow the living Word of God to nurture my faith and trust in Him who loves me unconditionally with a steadfast love; He who looks on me in my weakness with great mercy and compassion. That living word of God is life-giving. It not only informs my mind and heart, so that I come to know him better, but also transforms my life so that I can indeed become "the light of the world", "the salt of the earth." I know too that I will never be perfect in this life, but I am often comforted by the words of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta: "*God doesn't ask us to be successful - he asks us to be faithful.*"

"Behold I stand at the door and knock." This Lent, I shall be asking myself the question, "Am I open to hear that knock at the door of my heart each day, and am I going to open that door and welcome him in, whatever the cost to myself?" If I'm realistic, I know I have so little to give him, yet in my heart of hearts, I also know and believe that the little I have, he can, and will, multiply in abundance.

With an assurance of my prayers and blessing for you all this Lent,



Archbishop of Southwark