Diocesan Centre
Coursington Road
Motherwell
ML1 1PP

Rt Rev. Joseph Toal STB KC*HS
Bishop of Motherwell

18th February 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I hope this finds you and your family and friends well.

I heard someone remark in recent days that it has been a year-long Lent since last February. We have indeed come through an extraordinary period, marked for all of us by some deprivation and anxiety; an extended communal penance inflicted upon us by the coronavirus. For some the suffering has been more acute, because of personal illness, the illness of others, or the death of a loved one. We continue to hold each other in prayer, even when separated by the lockdowns, and we reach out to God for protection and healing. As we begin therefore the liturgical season of Lent and accompany the Lord in his suffering and death, we look forward to Easter and the hope of new life promised by his Resurrection.

The season of Lent mirrors the forty days Jesus spent in the desert in prayer and fasting, and these days also reflect the forty years the Jewish people spent wandering in the desert before they were able to reach the "Promised Land". The Old Testament books tell us of the difficulties of these years – the deprivations of food and water, the tensions and conflicts, the crises of leadership, the loss of hope for the future as they looked back to their past life, and, yes, anger at God and times of apostasy and loss of faith. It was a hard, almost brutal experience, but they survived it as a people and came at last to the "land of milk and honey". My thought as we begin this Lent is that the reality of life for us in the times ahead may be more akin to the forty years than the forty days, and it may take a long time and a lot of hardship before we fully recover from the travails of the past year. Our faith encourages us not to lose hope, and indeed we have the Lord Jesus within and among us to help us persevere, strengthening and protecting us through the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

In the reading at Mass today from the Book of Deuteronomy Moses instructed the people as they were about to enter the promised land after their long years in the desert:

"Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live, in the love of the Lord your God, obeying his voice, ***clinging to him;*** *for in this your life consists, and on this depends your long stay in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob he would give them."*

God wants us to cling on to him, whatever happens, and in doing so we will experience and know his love within us and the life of grace and goodness he offers us when we obey his voice and place our hope in his promises. While we seek security and consolation here in our earthly homeland, we also trust that we will share eternal life with the Lord in our heavenly homeland, and that the way there is through, with, and in the Lord himself. Through Lent then let us cling to the Lord and ask him to cleanse and purify us of all that would keep us apart from him and from showing his love to all our brothers and sisters with whom we share our time here on Earth. This is our time – "The day of salvation" as St Paul told us on Ash Wednesday - and we must make the best of it. With the Lord Jesus we can do so, without him we may lose hope and patience. Let us cling on to Him!

Wishing you a fruitful and holy Lent, full of faith, hope and love,
Yours in Christ,
+ Joseph Toal