

PROVIDENCE

My dear brothers and sisters, I am happy to be with you this weekend, as your bishop. Thank you for all you do to witness to your Catholic Faith. Thank you also for all the renovation-work done on this beautiful church. And many thanks to Fr. Tom, the Parish Council, the Finance Committee, and to all of you for your love for Christ and His Church.

I remember years ago, the bishop sent me as a newly ordained priest to a great PP. Full of enthusiasm, I used to go everywhere with my diary under my arm. Fr. Paddy didn't like this: he used to say *I never keep a diary, Philip: I don't need to; it's all up here*. That to me seemed very risky! Indeed, one day we were in his study, when suddenly from the corner of my eye, I noticed a hearse go by the window. Fr. Paddy jumped up: *Oh my goodness: it's Eileen Smith's funeral!* To help him out, I offered to go and open the church doors and do the Rite of Reception, while he got ready for Mass. When I got to the back of church to unlock the doors, it was as if the whole of South Manchester was waiting outside. *Overslept, father?* someone quipped, as the crowd pushed in. I then vested and began the Reception: *In the waters of baptism Eileen died with Christ. May she now share with him eternal glory.* As I sprinkled the coffin with holy water, the undertaker rather anxiously whispered to me: *It's not Eileen, father; it's John!*

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks about Divine providence. God is our loving Father. He watches over the minutest details of our lives. We are his children, and all we need do is to ask, to trust, to implore him for all our needs, and all will be well. *Do not worry about tomorrow.* In speaking of Providence, Jesus is not saying we shouldn't keep a diary, nor that we'll never have to suffer. Rather, God wants us to *collaborate* with him. We're not to be Quietists, sitting back, nor to be Pelagians, self-reliant. We're meant to collaborate with God, to live in union with God, to be in a personal relationship with God. This is the way God has made us. Otherwise, we'll end up with stress, with heart problems, with blood pressure. Even when things go wrong, we must still pray to God, be close to Him, that in the long run he'll turn things to a good.

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, when we begin the great season of Lent, journeying with Jesus in the desert to Jerusalem. The word Lent is from the

Anglo-Saxon *Lencten* ('when the days lengthen'), meaning springtime. Lent is a religious springtime, a time of spiritual renewal, a joyful season when we are meant to renew our relationship with God receiving from Him new life. As a child, I used to think Lent was about giving things up. Later as a teenager, someone said it was more about doing something extra. In fact, the Fathers of the Church tell us, there are 3 works of Lent, not just one: self-denial, prayer and charity. These 3 works, self-denial, prayer, charity, are meant to help us renew our love for Jesus. Together with the Sacrament of Confession, they help bring about a Lencten, a lengthening life, a real rebirth and renewal.

Does a woman forget her baby? Even if she forgets, I will never forget you. In this Mass, let us place ourselves totally in God's hands. Indeed, let us pray for the grace of a renewed friendship with God, a total trust in his Providence. May he free us from all worry and anxiety. And as we begin this week the great season of Lent, let us pray that this year he bring about within us a change of life and a spiritual rebirth.