As a shepherd keeps all his flock in view when he stands up in the middle of his scattered sheep, so shall I keep my sheep in view.

As the Church’s year draws to a close and we prepare for a new season of Advent leading up to Christmas it is a great pleasure to celebrate this annual Civic Mass for the wellbeing of our city and for God’s blessing upon all its people. I pray especially for all those who serve the common good of the people of Birmingham and I invite you to join me in this prayer here at St Chad's today.

I also pray for those who are most in need in our communities at this time of year when the cold of winter and the festive mood of others can increase their burdens. It is uplifting to see the difference that some of the city’s charitable projects can make to the quality of people’s lives. Earlier this year I went with my fellow bishop and friend, Bishop David Urquhart, to visit the Sifa-Fireside Centre in Digbeth working to tackle homelessness and alcohol abuse. Together we saw clearly the goodness of human nature in their work of befriending others and offering them fresh hope for the future.

Gathering here at St Chad's we are united in prayer with our Christian neighbours at nearby St Philip’s Anglican Cathedral and we look forward to being with them during their 300th Anniversary celebrations in 2015. I am grateful for the fruitful collaboration between our two Cathedrals and for the friendship of St Philip’s Cathedral Dean Catherine Ogle.
One of the privileges of being Archbishop, which I share with the other Faith Leaders of the City and with many who are present today, is the opportunity to see what is not so readily visible in every walk of life. There are times when we see the evidence of inhumanity, the effects of neglect or indifference to want in the lives of children or vulnerable people, the capacity to exploit people's lives for material gain, and irresponsible behaviour that results in suffering for others.

But these things often draw the best by way of response from organizations and dedicated volunteers. There are many times through them when we are enabled to see the beauty of the human nature that God has created and the potential for goodness given a chance to flourish. In the course of this year I was grateful to receive a letter from the Lord Lieutenant who had visited one of our Catholic Schools serving the needs of the wider community in a way that reached far beyond denominational borders. Faith communities know that they cannot flourish if they seek only to serve the needs of their own members – a much wider vision is needed.

As Christians we believe that Jesus Christ had that wider vision and that he came for the salvation of all mankind, not just for a few. Today's feast of Christ the King emphasises the compassion of Jesus as a servant or shepherd-king who notices all the flock. He is ready to leave the ninety-nine to seek out the lost sheep and return it to the fold. His ministry is foretold by the Prophet Ezekiel in the first reading: *As a shepherd keeps all his flock in view when he stands up in the middle of his scattered sheep, so shall I keep my sheep in view.*

Christian faith teaches that Jesus was born for this ministry of service, ultimately to give his life out of love for the world and to rise to new life to give us a new way of living. From the very beginning of his life his own experience prepared our Lord for the mission entrusted to him by his heavenly Father: the longing of the Virgin Mary for the birth of this child, the hardships of his birth in a stable, the experience of being a refugee from political aggression, and the influence of those who longed to see him – the shepherds of Bethlehem and the wise men from the East.

The story of the Nativity of Christ, celebrated at Christmas, helps us to understand his concern for those who suffer through oppression, neglect or poverty of any kind. It is a challenge that many people remain unaware today of the basic facts of the life of Jesus Christ – this is a story that needs and deserves to be re-told. For that reason I am immensely grateful that the City Art Gallery and Museum has re-instated this year the Nativity Trail, re-telling the story of Jesus' birth through beautiful and evocative works of art that have the power to touch and move us.

The city's magnificent art collection offers a way of seeing Jesus and seeing what he sees. This is a theme that has been taken up recently by Bishop Christopher Cocksworth, the Bishop of Coventry, in his new book *Seeing Jesus and being seen by him.* He reflects on *people who saw Jesus and discovered what it was like to be seen by him. They were never quite the same afterwards...seeing differently in the light of that seeing.*

It challenges us all to ask ourselves *what do we see and how do we see it?* This is a particular challenge to those of us whose calling affords us the privilege of seeing more of our communities or of seeing further into the lives of others as judges or counsellors or pastors. How do we dispose ourselves to see clearly and objectively, not without feeling but without prejudice?
Bishop Christopher’s book reflects on the impact of our experience on the way we see the world. He writes that: seeing Jesus and being seen by him opens our eyes not only to the beauty of ourselves but to the dignity of others, including those we had grown to regard as in some way less than ourselves. We begin to see others, as well as ourselves, as Jesus sees them.

He goes on to say: the London 2012 Paralympics were a watershed in attitudes to the disabled in the UK and beyond...although I had thought I was entirely enlightened in my own approach to disability, I found that all sorts of assumptions in my own attitudes were being challenged and changed by the Games.

Those insights are illustrated by the vision that Jesus shares with his disciples in the Gospel of St Matthew. He speaks of the last judgment not as a prediction of what is inevitable but as a warning and encouragement to look again at our lives and at the lives of others. Do I really see and therefore try to meet the needs of those who are hungry and thirsty, those newly arrived as strangers and those who have nothing, the sick and those who are in prison?

In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me. To honour Jesus Christ as King, Christians must join forces with all people of good will together with people of other faiths in reaching out to the neediest people in our society.

The Birmingham Faith Leaders Group is currently preparing to sign a Covenant with Birmingham City Council and we have been encouraged in this by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society. The Covenant will be a joint commitment between our faith communities and the local authority to a set of principles that will guide our engagement together, aiming to remove the mistrust that can sometimes exist and promoting practical co-operation for the common good.

In the Covenant the local authority is being asked to commit itself to welcome the involvement of faith communities in the delivery of services and social action on an equal basis with other groups. The faith-based organisations in their turn are being asked to commit ourselves to work actively with the civic authority in the design and delivery of services. This is one example of the ways that we seek to work together for the good of our city.

We see our city as a very significant part of the world that God loved so much that he sent his only Son. May the blessing of God’s Son, born a helpless child at Bethlehem and forever with us as a Servant-King, be upon all who serve this city and its people in public office today and in the year ahead.

*Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham