CONSOLATION AND DESOLATION
A Pastoral Letter for November from the Bishop of St Asaph
To all the faithful of the Teulu Asaph

We might almost have felt that we have been going backwards in recent weeks. By the time you read this, we shall have finished our second bout of lockdown in Wales, while our neighbours to the east have settled down into a full month of lockdown. The second wave of Covid is flowing around us, and the outlook for Christmas is highly uncertain. My sense is also that we are weary; weary of the vigilance, of the restrictions, of the uncertainty, of the risk. It was one thing to have almost the excitement and new challenges of lockdown in the Spring (Do you remember those weeks upon weeks of beautiful weather that we had?). It is quite another as the days and weather close in to realise that we are far from through this.

St Ignatius Loyola is a Roman Catholic saint of the sixteenth century, who founded one of the most dynamic of the religious orders, the Jesuits. Pope Francis is a Jesuit – the first Jesuit to have been elected Pope in fact. Ignatius came from a soldiering background, and he applied all the discipline and training of the military life to the task of growing in faith and following Jesus. Ignatian Spirituality – the approach to faith and prayer and discipleship that he developed – is very popular in the twenty-first century and many Christians of all denominations find that its practices are a very real and practical help to growth in faith and wisdom.

One of the things that Ignatian Spirituality teaches us is to be conscious in our lives of both Consolation and Desolation. We're probably familiar with these terms already – to be consoled is to have the comfort of friends and supporters; we are desolated when something goes deeply wrong and causes us upset. I'm sure that some of us will also have had the experience of getting the consolation prize, when we've missed out on winning! However, when Ignatius spoke of consolation and desolation, he was speaking of more than our feelings and emotions. He was speaking of our actions and our will. For Ignatius, to know God is the highest goal in life, to be caught up into his love and glory and light. Consolation is therefore movement towards God, while desolation arises out of movement away from God.

Amidst the encircling gloom of this season and of restriction, it seems to me that we have much to learn from Ignatian spirituality at this time. There is so much that can appear to come between us and God in these days: worry about our futures, preoccupation with our daily concerns, irritation and grumpiness with ourselves or with others, or merely life's circumstances. It would be easy to live in desolation, and to give God and our faith a miss.

However, this is precisely the time when we need to move towards God, to seek out consolation. And consolation is so much more than giving ourselves a break and comforting things – although these have their place and are a good place to begin. It is even more than resting in the presence of God, although prayer is always a good way to reconnect with the goodness of God which can flow sometimes invisibly around us. It is about doing those things which nourish the soul, and which take us on a journey towards God. It may be the time to read a good book or watch an inspirational film, to use our creativity in music, art or craft, but even these are rather inward facing. Consolation can flow from living among our neighbours as Christ lived – in kindness, in generosity, in giving hope to others. These don't have to be big actions; they may at times even be profoundly uncomfortable at first.

However, when desolation might just have the upper hand, investing in the things of consolation, that take us on the journey towards God, will give us balance, hope and life. On one occasion Jesus spoke to the crowds, "O that you would know the things that make for peace!" May God teach us the things that make for peace, that bring consolation, that help us to perceive and receive his blessing.