



**CRISPIAN HOLLIS
BISHOP OF PORTSMOUTH**

PASTORAL LETTER

Lent 2009

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

One of my earliest childhood memories is of Christmas afternoons being made by my mother to sit down and write "thank you" letters to all who had given me presents. And it didn't stop there; from an early age, it was drilled into me that whenever I received hospitality from anyone, be it a meal or a stay as a guest, I was always expected to write a "thank you" letter afterwards. Like many of the disciplines I acquired when I was young, this one has remained with me to this day. It's helped me to develop what the Americans might call "an attitude of gratitude", and I think that's something very important.

We live increasingly in a culture of rights and blame. Everything is ours by "right" and if we don't get our rights, we immediately look for someone or something to blame. We are in serious danger of losing sight of the fact that almost everything we have comes to us as gift. Once we lose sight of that, then thankfulness goes out of the window.

The greatest gift we have is our life which, our faith tells us, can only come from God, the author of life. With that life, there comes the essential freedom to be the person God wants us to be. We read of Jesus weeping over the city of Jerusalem because it failed to recognise him and I feel sure that there must be times when he weeps over us because we fail to recognise the extraordinary giftedness which is ours, gifts which make it possible for us to live as children of God.

If we had a strong and developed sense of thanks for all God's gifts to us, then we would always want to do our best to use those gifts to the full. That's real gratitude and it's here – with that profound attitude of gratitude - that I want to start this simple Lenten reflection.

First of all then, we need to renew our recognition of all that God has given us. This means giving time to God to ponder and reflect and to pray. I don't mean time that's necessarily full of words and frantic activity. I mean quality time – and silence – when we can pray and listen to the Lord who gives us life and who invites us to share life with him. When we listen to the Lord, when we seek his face in prayer, then we begin to understand how everything that we are and everything we have comes to us as his gift – and we can be profoundly thankful.

Secondly, Lent challenges us to develop an appetite and hunger for God, which is sharpened by whatever discipline we choose. This isn't fasting for fasting's sake – that's not very helpful - fasting is a very special way of putting Jesus more and more at the centre of our lives so that we can grasp hold of what is really important. It can happen through prayers and devotions; it can happen because we give time to others. But it's certainly true that the more time we give to the Lord and to seeking his face, the



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less we concentrate on ourselves and our own needs. Fasting, in its broadest sense, helps us to recognise more richly the sheer gift in the life that God has given us.

And then there is almsgiving, the third traditional feature of our Lenten observance. This is a challenging and generous using and sharing of all the gifts we have. It may mean giving money to the poor; it may be helping others by giving them time and love; it may be giving service in all sorts of ways to our parish or to our community. And it may mean that, in these difficult days of recession, we do all we can to make ourselves and our communities aware of all those who are finding things very difficult and doing our best to help them. But whatever we do, Lent is about giving and sharing the abundance that we have, all of which is God's gift to us.

This makes Lent a real time of stewardship, which is a spirituality which is becoming more and more one of the important features of the implementation of the Pastoral Plan and increasingly part of our diocesan culture. Stewardship begins with that attitude of gratitude. It's about recognising our gifts and using them for the Lord and for the community. It's about recognising and using our time, our talents and our treasure and it challenges us to use our gifts generously for God and for our brothers and sisters. "See", God says to us in today's first reading, "I am doing a new deed, I am making a path in the wilderness, paths in the wilds." We become God's new deed as he transforms us during Lent. He uses what he has given us, and our thankfulness, to transform and transfigure the wilderness of the society that surrounds us.

Thankfulness, prayer, fasting and generous sharing of gifts are the traditional hallmarks of Lent. When we embrace them generously then, more and more, we are brought face to face with Christ who loves us and gives himself for us. This Lenten journey of faith, on which we are setting out and which we share with so many others, leads us more into being true and faithful disciples. The Lenten journey brings us to the face and heart of Christ and it's there that we truly find our way of proclaiming and being the Good News of the Kingdom.

May God bless you all,

To be read or made available at all Masses celebrated in the diocese on the weekend of February 21st/22nd 2009.