



The Rt. Rev. Crispian Hollis
Bishop of Portsmouth

Bishop's House,
Bishop Crispian Way,
PORTSMOUTH,
Hampshire
PO1 3HG

Tel: 023 9282 0894
Fax: 023 9286 3086

Email: bishop@portsmouthdiocese.org.uk

PASTORAL LETTER

7th Sunday of the Year

"See, I am doing a new deed"

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

In the course of the last year – since Ash Wednesday of last year - I've had many rich and wonderful and demanding experiences because this has been an extraordinary year for me. Not only has my resignation been accepted, though I am still awaiting the naming and appointment of my successor, but also I have had to undergo two major operations for cancer. To say that this has changed my life and my outlook on life is a massive understatement. From being an active leader in good health and giving support and encouragement to others, I suddenly have become one of those needing support; for the first time in my life, I have received the Sacrament of the Sick and have become one of those listed in parish newsletters as being sick and in need of prayers. And yet, all the time the loving face of Christ has been there for strength and comfort.

I have been struggling to try to understand what Isaiah describes as the Lord doing a new deed in me. I know that I have been given a gift from the Lord which was not of my choosing and a great part of my journey of faith in recent months has been taken up with trying to come to terms with this gift and the giftedness of illness. I don't know where it will take me, but I have been graced enough to see God's hand in it all as I find myself on the threshold of a new way of life as I approach retirement. "No need", says the Lord, "to recall the past, no need to think about what was done before. See, I am doing a new deed... I am making a road in the wilderness, paths in the wild."

Many will think me crazy for describing my cancer as a moment of grace but that is precisely how I am beginning to see it. Already, through talking and praying and sharing my experience with others, I am discovering new ways of being the shepherd of the flock. Instead of being in control, I have become vulnerable and needy and I have had to be carried by the love and prayers of so many of you. It's meant being brought before the Lord, rather in the way that the paralytic is in today's Gospel. Your love and prayer have brought me into His healing presence – and He has healed me physically and, I hope, spiritually.

I don't know what lies ahead and I don't know, as yet, when I will be able to retire, but in a curious way, that doesn't matter any longer. I have a strong sense that whatever lies ahead will be extraordinary and transforming and certainly not in my control. I feel very peaceful about the future. I have been given the opportunity of a much needed moment of conversion and transformation of my whole life and I have been given the grace of time in which to achieve what God wants of me.

My illness has been a gift to me – I really believe that with all my heart. It has brought me into solidarity with so many who suffer and the Lord has enabled me to witness, even in suffering, to His loving and gentle care. I believe that in my sickness I have been able to touch many – or so I have been told.

Of course, there have been times when this gift has seemed much more of a burden than a blessing, bringing its own weariness, but then, in those moments I can see quite clearly that the Lord is leading me in His ways, not mine. He is leading me to new pastures, to live positively, with patience, optimism and hope, for my own sake but for the sake of others too. This is His way and all I hear Him saying to me now is "Follow me" and all that I can say to that is "Amen...Your kingdom come in me; Your will be done in me."

Next Saturday, many of us will gather in the Cathedral with those who are publicly seeking to be baptised or received into full communion with the Church at Easter and we will have the opportunity of being alongside them in their joy, and in the struggles of their journeys of faith. For my part, I will bring a new consciousness of having been gifted by the God of surprises with an illness that I never sought and it is leading me into a new vision and way of life. This has become my journey of faith. I don't know where it will end but I am confident that the Lord is doing all the leading and choosing. I am content that it should be so because, at the end of the journey, there is, for sure, Easter, Resurrection and new life. The Lord says "See, I am doing a new deed" and all we need to do is to hear His word, which calls us to follow Him, and then, allow Him to do that new deed in us.

May the Lord bless you all and bring you all safely to the joy of Easter. Pray for me at this time, sisters and brothers, as I pray for you, and let's pray together that our new bishop, when he is appointed, may be an ardent and gentle shepherd for us all.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

To be read and made available at all Masses on the weekend of February 18th/19th 2012