



## THE BISHOP OF LEEDS

### Pastoral Letter Feast of the Holy Family 2008

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

During the course of the last few weeks, much attention has been given in the media to the question of assisted suicide. Those who are in favour of it have a dark and fatalistic view on the purpose of life and the process of dying. This stands in stark contrast with the feast of Christmas which celebrates the birth of Jesus, the Light of the World. The imagery that surrounds the telling of that event in the gospels is not without great significance: the darkness of the night, the loneliness and the fear of the young couple trying to find a place of shelter and safety, their longing for an understanding response from anyone at a time of need - all speak to us of the fact that, despite all of those difficulties, the Hope of the World was born – He who would bring light to those who *dwelt in darkness and in the shadow of death* came to live among us, to show us, by His own life, the purpose of our lives and the direction we should take.

Although Jesus was God, He did not shrink away from our human experiences. He lived with us and shared our lot, even profound suffering and the terrible sense of complete abandonment by God and his friends as He hung dying, like a criminal, on the Cross. It was a cruel death.

As I listened to people on radio and television who wished and indeed, by the time the programmes had come to be made, had succeeded in taking their own lives, I was filled with great sadness. I felt the same listening to the conversations of those who were with them or who supported them in their quest to terminate their lives. My heart was filled with compassion for them, because I felt there was something very precious in those final hours that was lacking. Instead of a realisation of how treasured every human life is in the sight of God our Father there was a sense of hopelessness and despair. But this also reminded me of the great struggle that many saints have had as they approached death. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux went through terrible suffering before she died a very painful death at the age of 24. It may shock you to know that she even contemplated ending her own life, so miserable did she feel. And yet she

is a saint and a very great one, because she allowed her faith in God to guide her through the difficulties that she faced. She knew that there was more to life than this world.

Many of the arguments for assisted suicide, currently advanced in the media, speak of the 'right to die'. It would not be long, I fear, before the 'right to die' became the 'duty to die'. We all occasionally feel useless and inadequate and I know from my long experience as a hospital chaplain that this can be especially true of the sick and the elderly. None of us wish to be a burden to others. How dark a thought it is to think of anyone as useless, or anyone as a burden. Killing is not the answer; care most surely is. We are rightly proud of the care that our doctors, nurses and the ancillary staff of our health services give us, as well as the support we receive from our families, our chaplains and our friends in such times of need.

Rather than looking down the road of assisted suicide we should be doing more, as a society, to provide greater resources in palliative care. We are indeed blessed by what is already being done in our hospitals and especially our hospices. Wonderful care is provided in these places not only for the sick person, but for their families, too. Much more, however, could be done with greater resources.

We know very little of what goes on when people are dying or lying in comas or suffering from the severe effects of a stroke or whatever other disease. Many feel inadequate when they stand by and see people suffer in these ways. Indeed, I did myself at the time of my own mother's very painful death. But what a dark reality it would be for us all, if those personal feelings of inadequacy were to lead to a lack of respect for the dignity that rightly belongs to every human being until the moment of natural death.

One of our Carmelite Sisters in the South of England, Sister Anne of Jesus, died from Motor Neuron Disease some years ago. During her illness, and before she died, she wrote this remarkable letter to her friends:

"Over the past few years," she began, "there have been one or two cases of people with Motor Neuron Disease reported in the media. They felt so overwhelmed by the disease that they have wanted to be helped to die. I do not wish to make any comment on them. Motor Neuron Disease can be cruel, but I would like to put on record that my experience has been quite different. These past two years have been a rich time of grace and joy. I thought that this terminal illness would be a steady and

inexorable decline, and it hasn't been like that at all. Rather, Saint Paul sums up the experience, when he says in his letter to the Corinthians:

*“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

(2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

“When I ask myself why I feel as I do about this disease I find a number of reasons. I was given some very good advice at the beginning. In hospital, I was told that research had shown that people who did best were those who just got on with things. My GP said to me, ‘Well, now that you know what it is, put that aside and get on with life. If there is anything you want to do, do it.’ Then, I had a great deal of support. People I hardly knew, as well as my own community, rallied round to send messages of sympathy and support. You cannot know how that helped. The NHS, too, was magnificent in supplying what I needed as was the Motor Neuron Disease Association. But the single most important factor in transforming all this into a positive experience was my faith. In this illness I was brought face to face with the reality of death. Anything I read, in my search for meaning, seemed to be only human thinking. And nobody seemed to know whether it was right or not. Then, in a moment of grace, I thought to myself: you have lived all your life with faith, now it is time for you to die with faith. I remembered the parable in the Gospel that Jesus told of the Merchant who sold all he had for the ‘pearl of great price.’ Motor Neuron Disease had taken everything away from me and it was then I found that I was given a ‘pearl of great price,’ a treasure that was worth all the rest, and it was simply given. I didn’t earn it or deserve it or work for it. It was simply given.

“One last thought.” she wrote, “Many of you prayed to Cardinal Newman for a miracle for me. Do not think that your prayers were not answered. What I received was, I promise you, much better than a miracle.”

Our faith is very precious. It is, indeed, the ‘pearl of great price.’ God’s real love for us, as shown by Jesus in His own life, sufferings and death, spurs us on to love and care for each other. Were we simply and conveniently to extinguish life at will we would create an intolerable desert of inhumanity, totally lacking in love and care. That is not the way

of Christ nor of His followers. Death is a reality that awaits us all. Some of you, at this Mass today, are more aware of that than others, and you have my prayers, as well as those of your family and this community. One day, death is something we shall all have to face. But with Christ and our families and our communities we shall not face it alone.

May the Good Lord richly bless you all as the New Year approaches, and through the prayers of Our Lady and Saint Joseph, may all of us in the Church become beacons of light and hope and truly caring towards each other as God's family.

Devotedly, with my blessing,



Bishop of Leeds

To be read at all Masses celebrated in the Diocese of Leeds on the Feast of the Holy Family, 27/28 December 2008.