



**PASTORAL LETTER OF BISHOP ALAN HOPES TO BE READ AT ALL MASSES IN THE DIOCESE
DURING THE WEEKEND OF DECEMBER 12/13 2015**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

The Season of Advent, which prepares us for the Coming of our Saviour, is a season of new beginnings. It is a season that challenges us to throw off the lethargy of indifference and sin and actually *run* towards the feast of God's love and mercy, revealed to us at Christmas.

The prayers of Advent are full of this image of *running*. They ask that we run with *loving desire* – like the shepherds, like the Magi – to greet the Lord at his first Coming in the stable at Bethlehem. They ask that we run with *hope* – like the apostles, the martyrs and all the saints - to greet the Lord at his Second Coming when he will establish his eternal Kingdom of justice and peace.

This year, Advent is especially blessed. Today, across the world, the Church begins the Jubilee Year of Mercy, proclaimed by our Holy Father, Pope Francis. During this year, he asks us to *gaze attentively* at the mystery of Mercy and to practice it in our daily lives.

So, what is Mercy?

Mercy is, first and foremost, God's action towards us. In this season of *our* running towards *the Lord*, Mercy is *the Lord's* running towards *us* with his indulgent love and forgiveness. He is like the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, who runs joyfully towards his son, on his return home after years of selfish indulgence.

Pope Francis tells us that the word Mercy *reveals the very mystery of the Holy Trinity*. Jesus Christ, who is the Mercy of the Father made visible, hurries towards us in the power of the Holy Spirit to meet us ...at Bethlehem in the flesh; at the end of time in glory; everyday on the altar and in the confessional in the form of a Sacrament.

He desires to be united with us! And this is the true joy and peace of being a Christian: the knowledge that we are loved for ever by God, in spite of our failures and sinfulness – a love which is initiated, not by ourselves, but by God himself.

Second, although God is the initiator of Mercy, he asks us to co-operate with the mercy he offers us. How do we do this?

In the Gospel we heard the voice of John the Baptist preparing the hearts and minds of the people to receive God's Son and his Gospel into their lives. To the tax collectors he says: *Exact no more than your rate*. To the soldiers: *No intimidation! No extortion!* And he tells those who have much to share with those who have nothing.

In other words – we can only receive Mercy if we are showing justice and mercy to others.

Pope Francis asks that during this year we should both reflect and act on the corporal and spiritual works of Mercy in order to *re-awaken our conscience...so that we can know whether or not we are living as the Lord's disciples*.

These works of Mercy are in the Lord's teaching:

The corporal acts of mercy – giving food and drink to the hungry and thirsty; clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick and those in prison, burying the dead.

The spiritual works of mercy- helping the doubtful, sharing the faith with others, lovingly correcting sinners, comforting the afflicted, forgiving others, being patient with those who hurt us, praying for the living and for the dead.


John the Baptist also reminds us that before we share the Mercy of God with others, we must first prepare to receive God's mercy into our own hearts. That means personal conversion – a radical change in the direction of our lives. And it begins with the sacrament of Confession. There our hearts are purified, healed of their wounds and lightened of their burdens – so that we might become more like the merciful and loving heart of our Saviour.

As your Bishop, and as a fellow penitent, one who can witness to the joy of receiving God's loving forgiveness and mercy in this sacrament, I want to invite each one of you to go to Confession during this Year of Mercy – and especially if you have not made your confession for a long time. Those liberating words spoken by the priest: *I absolve you from your sins*, are spoken to each one of us personally, by the Lord, through his priest. Pope Francis, also a fellow penitent, reminds us that the Lord *never tires of throwing open the doors of his heart*.

Yes, God in his great mercy throws open wide the doors of his heart to us. That image of God's openness is symbolised by the two Holy Doors that are to be opened in the Diocese today – one in the Cathedral and one in the national Shrine of Our Lady in Walsingham. They will be privileged and indulgenced places. In visiting them as pilgrims, we will experience God's indulgent mercy in answer to all the prayers we bring.

This Holy Year began as we celebrated Our Lady's Immaculate Conception – her preservation from original sin as God prepared her to be his Mother. She who receives God's Mercy – not as forgiveness but as a protection from sin – becomes for us the Mother of mercy. Through her, the Divine Mercy has entered our world and changed it for ever. During this year, let us place ourselves in the hands of our immaculate and merciful Mother. May Mary, who ran to bring the Gospel of Salvation to her cousin Elizabeth, teach us how to run to the Lord and rediscover his merciful love, made incarnate in the Manger at Christmas. Only then can we truly show God's Mercy and justice to all.

With all good wishes and prayers, yours devotedly.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading '+ Alan S. Hopes'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

+Alan

**The Right Reverend Alan S. Hopes
Bishop of East Anglia.**