

**PASTORAL LETTER OF  
THE RIGHT REV. ALAN HOPES  
BISHOP OF EAST ANGLIA  
THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT**

*To be read at all Masses during the weekend of February 20/21 2021*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our observance of the Holy Season of Lent reflects the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert before He began his public ministry of teaching and healing. His ministry culminates in His Passion, Death and Resurrection – a life freely given for our salvation.

As we follow in Our Lord's footsteps, our observance of the forty days of Lent also culminates in the sacramental celebration of His Passion, Death and Resurrection. Holy Week and Easter: a celebration which renews our lives with the fruits of forgiveness and eternal life.

That number 40 has a rich and mystical significance in the Sacred Scriptures. It is a period of testing and preparation. It is also a time that looks forward to reconciliation with God, and to new life lived according to His ways.

Noah spent 40 days in the ark when the whole earth was covered in flood – yet he, and all in the ark, were saved. Moses spent 40 days fasting on Mount Sinai before receiving the ten commandments, and a new covenant with God's chosen people. This same people spent forty years of testing in the desert, before entering the promised land and the new life that God had promised them.

For Jesus, His time of fasting and prayer in the desert was a time of discipline and preparation for His mission of salvation.

For us, these 40 days are a time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving that enable us to give our particular attention to God – putting Him and our neighbour first – as we prepare for the new life of Easter.

For those among us who are preparing to be welcomed into the Church at Easter, through the Sacraments of Initiation – Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion – it is a time of intense prayer and reflection.

For all of us this past year has been a time of great testing and privation.

We remember in our prayers the tens of thousands who have died with the virus in our country alone, and all those who grieve for them. We continue to pray for all who are still suffering; and for those who work tirelessly among them in our hospitals, hospices and care homes.

However, we are also beginning to see light in the middle of the darkness. The global vaccination process is underway. Our support of this process, in the midst of the pandemic, reflects our Catholic obligation to work together for the common good.

So, we can look to the future with hope and embrace the possibility of things returning soon to some degree of normality.

But like our scriptural forbears, we need to prepare for that future.

The Holy Father, Pope Francis, has been reflecting on precisely this. He has, therefore, proclaimed a Year of the Family within a year that also marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St Joseph as the Protector of the Church.

During this past year, we have seen just how important the Family is. So many have experienced how vulnerable relationships within our families can be. Children who no longer live at home have been unable to visit their parents. Grandparents have not been allowed to hug or see their grandchildren. Journeys to visit friends have not been possible. Like our faith, our family life was not intended to be lived in isolation.

So this will be a year, when the pandemic is over, for coming together once more and renewing those essential and close family ties.

Plans are underway for each Diocese and each parish to be able to mark this important year. Our Diocesan Marriage and Family Life Commission have already been discussing how we might assist in this renewal of the Family. Over twenty people are being trained across the Diocese for a Prayer and Listening Ministry to discuss problems big and small.

There will be Masses and retreats to celebrate Marriage and the Family during the course of the year, together with occasions when those who have lost a child, or who cannot have children, can come together to share their griefs and hopes. Every parish will need to reflect on how it might celebrate this year, helping to strengthen family life and assisting those who have gone through difficulties.

Renewing those essential and close family ties will also be vital for the Family of God – the Church.

We also need to look towards that time when we all come together as the Church – to celebrate and renew our common faith and friendship with God and with each other;

to celebrate our common need for the grace we receive in the Sacraments – especially the Eucharist. For the Mass is the foretaste of heaven – it is *our* Promised Land.

May the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, pray for us all as we begin our journey towards Easter.

With warmest good wishes and prayer for you all,

Yours devotedly in Jesus Christ,

+Alan S. Hopes

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