

**The Bishop of Portsmouth**  
The Rt Revd Dr Jonathan Frost

28 October 2024

I do hope that this finds you well and in good heart.

I write in advance of the parliamentary debate on assisted suicide. I am aware that this topic is profoundly emotive. In our culture we have rather sanitised death and find it difficult to speak about publicly. For many, as the matter is debated in Parliament, memories will turn to the times spent with loved ones in their final weeks, days and moments. Be assured if I can be of any support to you at all, around these issues or others please do be in touch.

Every member of Parliament, whatever their view on these matters, will be motivated by compassion for those approaching the end of their life. I imagine many, if not all, MPs will be receiving correspondence containing heartbreaking stories. Without diminishing the significance of these narratives, I think it important to retain perspective as we approach consideration of assisted suicide. Over more than 30 years of ministry to the dying and the bereaved it has been my observation that a 'good death' is possible, not simply for the few but the many. I believe there is a hopeful story to tell: a narrative about the end of life which fully recognises the challenges - medical, emotional and social - and calls upon us to rise to them.

With colleagues in the House of Bishops, I welcome the exchange of ideas in Parliament. The question of assisted suicide, and how we might seek a good death for ourselves, our neighbours and those we love, are weighty matters deserving the fullness of our attention. As I have pondered my own experience of accompanying those who are dying, the opinion of medical experts, and international evidence, I have become increasingly concerned about the prospect of legalising assisted suicide. While I am deeply sympathetic to those who fear a 'bad death', I believe that a *good death* is possible without taking such a significant step.

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In my view, the route to a dignified death lies in the proper funding of palliative care, investment in mental health services, and the delivery of much-needed community support. Prioritising and investing in these three dimensions of public life will surely help to address the medical, emotional and social dimensions attending to the end of life, and will enable us as a nation to work towards a good death for everyone.

Furthermore, as I consider the legalisation of assisted suicide I am concerned about the inability to safeguard the most vulnerable members of society. I have no doubt that the vast majority of families will move heaven and earth to ensure their loved ones do not feel a burden. Sadly, I do not feel it will be true for all families.

You will no doubt be aware, as I am through long pastoral experience in community, that many older people experience abuse towards the end of life. The charity Hourglass estimates that 2.7m UK citizens have been abused while over the age of 65. I am concerned that a change in the law will put older people at serious risk of abuse and coercion at the end of life. There is also a ‘messaging’ frequently encountered in the media that to be a good parent or grandparent is to make funeral arrangements in such a way “as not to be a burden.” This is a difficult point to express, however, it can at least be argued that this messaging only makes older people more susceptible to feeling that it would be better to end life early than to be an inconvenience or a burden to loved ones or society. The faith tradition that has historically shaped the ethics of this nation is clear on this point: each person, made in the image of God, is of infinite and inviolable value. It could be argued, as I would wish to, that then journey of accompanying another as they face their death is one life’s greatest privileges.

I am also concerned about other vulnerable groups more broadly. Disability campaigners and those working with women in abusive relationships are highlighting the danger of unintended consequences should the law be changed. As I have reflected on the realities of abuse and manipulation across a wide variety of demographics I have increasingly struggled with the language of ‘choice’ which so characterises much of the current conversation. I fear the rhetoric of ‘choice’ can often reflect the experience of those who have benefitted from the very best gifts life in western liberal democracies can offer. By contrast I see the choices faced by the elderly, vulnerable and deprived in our society as being far more constrained and limited.

No doubt the hardest thing to safeguard against is the psychological impact of legalising assisted suicide. From the Oregon experience, we learn that almost half of those who have elected for life-ending drugs say they feel like a burden to friends and families. Amidst the

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current crisis of funding in adult social care, it is surely imaginable that the sheer cost of care could push many to assisted suicide, as has demonstrably been the case in Oregon and Canada. The scriptures of Judaeo-Christian traditions warn against laws which place an undue burden on people. Assisted suicide may be a weight which is too heavy for any of us to bear.

I greatly appreciate you taking time to read this letter. Please read it as an invitation to further discussion. I believe Parliament will only develop the legal framework supporting a good death if legislators take the time to listen to one another carefully. I am grateful to you for engaging with my reflections, and I look forward to the opportunity to hear yours.

With very best wishes and my prayers,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+Jonathan". The signature is written in a cursive style. Above the first few letters, there is a small, stylized flourish that resembles a cross or a similar symbol. Below the signature, there is a long, thin horizontal line that tapers at both ends.

**+Jonathan, Bishop of Portsmouth**

Cc to Parliamentary address

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