

## Rector's Letter February 2020

Dear Friends,

### Lent begins on Wednesday!

A current exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum of **The Art of Food in Europe, 1500-1800, is entitled 'Feast and Fast'**. This simple title reminds us of the relationship which existed through many centuries (and still does today in some parts of the world) between truly exuberant celebration and the discipline of self-denial. We are still invited to enter into this rhythm by the church in the keeping of Lent in order to experience the celebration of Easter more intensely. For many people, the self-discipline of Lent still involves 'giving something up'; others prefer to 'take something on' for Lent. A fellow student of mine at theological college announced that she was taking up inviting people to tea whom she didn't really get on with - and then, if you got an invitation, she would hastily assure you that you weren't one of those people! The vicar who trained me when I first went into ministry used to take up reading a newspaper he really disagreed with during Lent (partly to get into his parishioners' minds). As he was a Labour supporter working in the Surrey commuter belt, this means he usually took up reading the *Daily Telegraph* for six weeks, which I think he found (shall we say) 'challenging'!

Whatever you do, or don't do for Lent, may I urge you to mark the season in some significant way as a time of penitence, reflection, self-discipline, generosity and justice. I believe this will lead to a more joyful celebration of Easter, the greatest of the Christian feasts. Too much in our society have we lost our sense of the year's rhythm, with hot cross buns available at all seasons, and ever-present advertisements urging us to indulge ourselves and 'chillax'.

I mentioned Lent as a time of justice because the Old Testament prophets were strong in reminding a people who knew how to 'do' religious fasts by giving up food and wearing sackcloth and ashes, that they were sometimes serving their own interests on their fast days, and that the fast God would bless would be one which involved loosing the bonds of injustice and letting the oppressed go free. (See Isaiah 58:1-12, a passage we will hear read at the Ash Wednesday service this week). Really, the point of fasting and all other Lenten disciplines is to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in making us people more ready to 'do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God' (Micah 6.8).

In addition to this letter to you, I have already also sent links to two other documents – **the Lent calendar for St Mary's, and a sheet explaining some of the different opportunities for study, prayer, fellowship and reflective creativity**. Please look at them carefully, and decide prayerfully what you would like to share in. You will be very welcome, even if you can't come to every session of an activity.

### Other ideas for Lent and beyond

Something you will see in church from the first Sunday in Lent onwards is a '**Lenten Tree**', made out of the church Christmas tree and another one (ours, in fact!). Quite a lot of churches display these throughout Lent, stressing the link between Jesus' coming at Christmas and what he went on to do through his suffering and death. I hope that we will still have it there on Easter Day, but alive with flowers, representing resurrection. At the beginning of each 10 am service in Lent we shall ask (in advance) one person to come forward and say very briefly (in no more than a couple of sentences) what Lent means to them, and leave an object representing their thought, at, or hanging on, the tree. I remember from a previous parish how varied people's ideas were, and how rich the symbolism was of what they brought to the tree. I hope this will create a sense of shared experience and conversation throughout the congregation during the season. We can also put explanatory information with the objects, for those visiting the church during the week to read. If you would like to be one of the people who brings something, please let me know – it would be very helpful to have volunteers!

For those who would personally find it helpful to follow a daily reflection for Lent on an app for their phone or tablet, the Church of England has published the free resource (hashtag) **Live Lent**. This also follows a theme of caring for God's creation, with something to think about and pray about each day. It's very easy to download, on both Android and Apple devices.

**Christian Aid** is offering the opportunity to follow its *Count your Blessings* campaign online. You can sign up for the Adult version of daily updates here: <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/count-your-blessings-2020-adult>. Families and children can also follow their own version. The campaign this year focuses on the effects of climate change on a particular family badly affected by drought in Kenya.

In addition, thinking about justice and injustice in Britain, some of you will remember supporting **Church Action on Poverty** last year. I have recently signed an open letter which they prepared, calling on all the denominations officially to take the issue of poverty seriously. The open letter is being published this Sunday, and I have been asked to draw it to your attention, so I reproduce it below. I hope you will concur with its concerns. Later in the year I will be asking my daughter Felicity, who is currently working for CAP, to come and speak to us about their 'Speaking truth to Power' campaign, what it is doing, and how we can help. But here is the open letter for you to read, think and pray about for now:

### ***Our message to the UK's churches***

*There is a pressing need to bring the deepening crisis of poverty, afflicting many of our families and communities, to the centre of our life together as a nation.*

*Brexit debates and the recent General Election have revealed and exacerbated painful divisions in society. Far too many feel left behind, ignored and marginalised. As local churches, we bear witness to these realities in communities the length and breadth of the UK, and to the powerful currents that continue to sweep so many into debt and destitution.*

*The Church cannot remain silent for as long as this situation continues to exist. For us, this is a matter of faith: It is about responding to the gospel priority to put the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable first.*

*As churches, we must redouble our efforts not just to alleviate the symptoms of poverty, but to call out the root causes, systems and structures which ensnare so many in poverty today.*

*At local level, we commit to becoming genuinely part of a 'church at the margins' where those on the margins of society feel welcomed, where their God-given dignity is recognised, and where their talents, hopes and visions for the future are celebrated and affirmed.*

*At national level, we call on our church institutions to commit to the task of becoming a true church at the margins and to properly resource this, as a genuine expression of the gospel priority for the poorest and most vulnerable.*

*Above all, as Churches we are compelled to speak truth to power, with and alongside those whose voices are consistently ignored by those in power in corporate, media and public life. Poverty and gross inequality are not acts of God but structural defects that can be corrected. Speaking truth to power is a task for the whole Church, and one given greater urgency now, amid political debates that continue to expose the divisions within society.*

*As the Lord heard the cry of his people in exile in the Old Testament and intervened, let churches hear the cry of the poor in our neighbourhoods, and work with them to realise a vision of a society in which all can enjoy life in all its fullness.*

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With all these thoughts and opportunities to do something special for Lent, I wish you a fruitful season, leading to a very joyful and blessed Easter.

With my love and prayers,  
Maggie.

(PS Don't forget to look at the Lent Activities sheet and the Lent Calendar and keep them by you over the next few weeks.)