

Vicar's Letter for February 2017

Dear Friends

I am writing this in mid-January in the cold - yesterday we had a bit of snow and some ice on the paths. Christmas can feel a long time ago, but hopefully there is still a glow inside each of us as we recall our times spent with family and friends. We are now looking ahead to Spring and some warmer weather!

This year in our Church calendar we have a few 'fallow' weeks throughout the whole of February - by that I mean from the end of Christmastide ((2nd February when we celebrate the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, as described by Luke in his Gospel (2: 22-40) and the beginning of Lent which this year starts on 1st March which is Ash Wednesday.

Perhaps February can be a month to take stock? Some years Lent begins so very early after 2nd February that there is hardly time to take a breath and we are plunged into the Lent and the preparations for Easter. But this year we have a few weeks' grace.

As I write we have not yet had our Away Day (this will be 22nd January), and by the time this month's magazine reaches you, it will have taken place and I hope and pray and expect that we will be a little clearer as to some of our **priorities** for ourselves at St Matthew's, more sure of our **values** and our **vision** for the next few years as God's people, disciples of Jesus in our community.

So perhaps as you read this we can each think of what we value and what is important to us as Christians - and how this will shape our keeping of Lent this year. What will you do to support your faith, focus your faith and deepen your faith?

Since early times Lent has been a time of preparation as we look forward to Easter and is often a time when people 'give things up', often treats, such as chocolate, cakes, sweets or alcohol, but sometimes something different like watching television, driving the car when you could walk, or buying yet another pair of shoes or another jumper! The idea of giving something up for Lent is a way to identify with the fasting Jesus experienced in the wilderness for 40 days as his time of prayerful preparation before his public ministry.

Giving things up in our culture of plenty is a valuable thing to do; it reminds us of what is truly necessary in our lives and it reminds us of how blessed we are in our lives of so much choice.

But we can also take up something extra to do for Lent - it might be reading a spiritual book, attending our ecumenical Lent course (more details nearer Lent!), taking time to read one of the Gospels - yes, we are familiar with them but reading them ourselves from chapter one all the way through can shed light in a new way, or some extra five minutes of prayer and intercession for our Church, world and community.

Or you might decide to make a point of undertaking some visiting – perhaps visiting one person each week during Lent who you wouldn't normally see, or making a phone call to someone each week who you haven't spoken to for a while. Taking this on in a thoughtful way could make a huge difference to those who are lonely.

Or perhaps you could decide to support our Fairtrade stall throughout Lent. Fairtrade goods are increasingly available in supermarkets and we try here at St Matthew's to promote Fair-trade goods and raise our awareness. Are you a regular user of Fairtrade tea, coffee and sugar? Fairtrade cleaning products? Fairtrade biscuits or chocolate? (although this might clash if you have decided to give up sweet things during Lent!!) Using Fairtrade products really does change peoples lives and makes a statement about working towards a more just society.

Surely this is at the heart of Lent - to change our hearts and lives to be less self-centred and more God-centred. Do you remember the words of the prophet Micah (chapter 6:8)?:

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

May this month of February be a useful time for you to take stock and think about your relationship with God, whatever you each personally take time to decide to do or not do for the season of Lent.

With every blessing
Kate