

May these words be pleasing. Amen.

In this our long season of waiting we have arrived in Lent, a time to build *stillness* and *strength*, a time to discover, to rediscover where we are most likely to encounter God. Where are we most likely to encounter our God?

Lent is not a season to give up joy nor is it without humour. Can I show you three slides. We began our season on Wednesday with this graphic, which, to me, said Ash Wednesday.



James, ever helpful, past my computer and laughed – ‘Tash Wednesday!’.

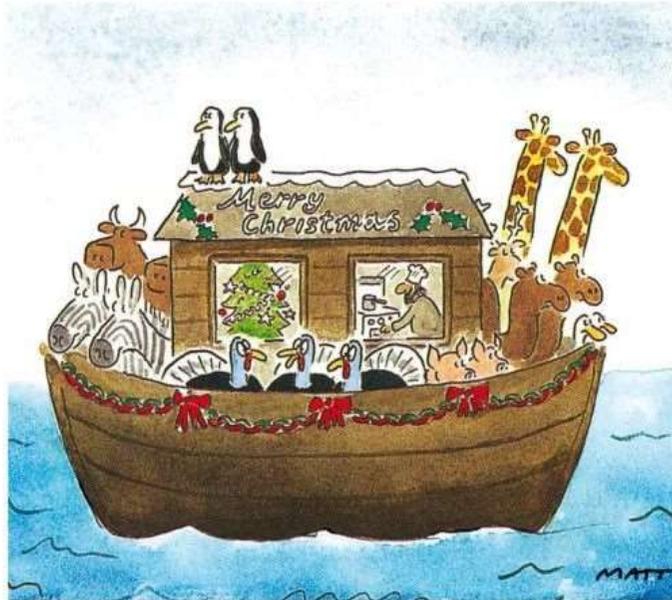
Also, this week, was a Matt cartoon in The Telegraph.

MATT



'And then, after months, they emerge from lockdown looking fatter, hairier and much worse than before'

Call me an optimist but I am hoping that we discover and rediscover many *beautiful* things in our world (and in each other) when we get through this trauma. Talking of trauma our Old Testament reading this morning takes us to the end of the great flood from which Noah and the animals were saved. Here is another cartoon by Matt, one that depicts the ark.



'Have you ever wondered why there are two of everyone else and three of us?'

The message of the Great Flood is that God has the power and reason to stop the clock, wipe the slate clean and start all over again. The sign of the rainbow is God's promise that he will never do this again. He will find a *different* way to cover our shame. We claim that way in Jesus who in our gospel reading, in this the season of Lent, heads to the wilderness, there to encounter God, there to be God. In Lent we are called to discover and rediscover where we are most likely to encounter God.

One place we long to encounter God *together* is here in church. For now we give thanks for the different ways that we *can* be together this morning. Here is a story from when we were once able to also meet in Hudswell church. One

evening in late Spring I led a service on a beautiful and sunny afternoon. There was only about 10 of us so it was easy to ask questions and lead a discussion after the reading. I explained that having been on a waiting list for an allotment Gillian and I had just been told that we had been given a plot on Westfields. It had been well looked after but in the short space of time between the previous tenant leaving and ourselves taking over, the plot had become overgrown, the good plants shooting up alongside many varieties of weeds. What would be the advice of the good people at church in Hudswell? What should we do? A man I did not recognise was the first to respond. Before taking his suggestion I apologised for not knowing who he was. I expected him to be someone from the village but he explained that he was visiting from Lancaster. He said that he would clear the plot and start afresh. 'Do you have an allotment?' I said. He explained that he worked for the County Council, and he looked after *all* the allotments in Lancashire! That was his job. Everyone else dutifully agreed that they too would clear the plot and start again! You may have guessed that the reading for that afternoon was the parable of the wheat and the tares, the servants reporting to their master this unholy mix of good crop and weeds. The master does not command that they are both destroyed but rather that they are allowed to grow together and not separated until the harvest. Thank God that his approach with us is different to our approach with our plot on Westfields.

It was, as I say, a beautiful sunny late spring afternoon with blue skies but also frequent showers scuttling through on the wind. The view from the back of Hudswell church was and is stunning and worth the risk of getting everyone out of the church (mid-service) to look across the valley towards Richmond and, on the hillside, our new allotment on Westfields. What greeted us in the skies across Richmond and across the allotments was a beautiful shining rainbow.

Before Noah and his boat was Adam. He encountered God in the garden, but when tempted he failed. In the wilderness he still has God but when tempted, he still fails. In Jesus this is put in reverse. God is found in the wilderness, Jesus is tempted, but prevails. In Holy Week we will find God in the garden, Jesus will be tempted but will prevail.

We too can seek to find those places in body and mind where we most encounter God. If I wish a bike ride I must first get on the bike. If I wish to go somewhere by car, first get behind the wheel, if I wish to go for a walk, first put on shoes. If I wish to make music first sit down at the piano and lift the lid. If we wish to meet God.....

We may be content with unexpected moments such as rainbows in Hudswell. We may choose, however to discover and rediscover those places where we are most attentive to our God's ceaseless presence. We can tune-in to God's rhythm

of life, morning prayer and evening prayer available each day here in our benefice. We can light a candle, read and pray. We can walk more gently in God's world by consuming *less*. We can do *more* in terms of service, loving others as Christ loves us. In all these things may we find stillness and strength, satisfaction and joy in this season of Lent.

A prayer: May we find places to encounter God, and in him find stillness and strength. And may God bless us, that in us may be found love and humility, obedience and thanksgiving, discipline, gentleness and peace. Amen