

Gracious God, we thank you for your word
and pray that it may deepen our love for you
and strengthen our faith in you.
That Christ may dwell in our hearts.

Amen.

What a difference a year makes! Last year, we gathered for our Ash Wednesday service in St Alfege Church and Pat spoke to us about Lent being an opportunity for a spiritual spring clean- a time to move furniture around; dust corners we hardly ever see; and patch up whatever needs attention.

It is a great metaphor for Lent and for our spiritual lives. Our faith is a living and dynamic aspect of us. And yet, too often, we plod along doing nothing to either challenge ourselves nor to nourish ourselves. It is necessary to spring clean our lives of faith- do we pray in the way we have always prayed, even if that doesn't offer us much anymore? Do we read the same parts of the Bible and gloss over the bits we don't like or find boring? Sometimes a spring clean offers a chance to throw out the old. But it may also offer an opportunity to appreciate something anew, to find a treasure that is hidden or overlooked.

Yesterday, our Reader David, sent me two photos from the 2020 annual pancake race in Greenwich market. In one photo David, Susan and I are clustered together gazing towards the sky as David flips a pancake in the air. In the other, the three of us are racing against one another, cassocks and pancakes flying through the air! People are crowded all around us, watching and cheering us on. It was great fun and we were happy to do something silly to show that “religious” people can be normal too...

Looking at those photos brought a smile to my face. They made me remember how cold it was that day and how difficult it was to run in heels on a cobbled path wearing a cassock all the while flipping pancakes up and down! It was only after several minutes that I realised how nice it was to see myself standing close to my colleagues, nobody wearing masks, all of us relaxed in the hustle and bustle of the busy market.

In the reading from Matthew's Gospel, we hear these words- 'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' It works equally well the other way around- 'Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also.' I'd like us to consider the pandemic tonight and all that it has taught us about what we really, truly and deeply treasure.

I can tell you what I want, I want to hug someone I've known and loved for a long time and haven't been able to see for months. I'd like to meet with friends and family and not have to worry about whether we're both wearing masks, or how far we are standing apart, or whether we're outside, or whether we've sanitised our hands. It is the relaxed and happy company of others that I am missing. So I discover that is one of my treasures. What have you discovered; what do you treasure?

And over the past year we have been asked to give up a lot for all that we treasure. We've had to give up hugs and social contact. We've had to give up holding the hand of the people we love the most as they die. We've had to give up being at the funerals or weddings of loved ones. We've been asked to give up a lot in order to safeguard what it is we really treasure- each other.

Too often we think of Lent as a time that requires us to give up something. This I think is to misunderstand the point of the Lenten discipline. This verse from Matthew's gospel is actually one of the most important and insightful in terms of our relationship with God-it is only when we discover what we truly treasure that we will know where our hearts are. And Lent is our opportunity to give up something that gets in the way of that treasure. Or, to come back to the spring-cleaning metaphor, Lent is our time to give up whatever puts a fine layer of dust over that which we treasure, or stains it, or pushes it to the corner of the room. Lent can be our opportunity to allow that treasure to be brought out into the light again.

And when we put like that, what difference, what possible significance could a chocolate biscuit or the lack there-of really make? Not one bit of difference.

So, please, don't give up anything this Lent. We have collectively given up so much. Rather, take up something that will bring you rest. That will nurture you. Give yourself the gift of time to pray, or time to dwell on God's word, or time to join the discussion group we are running. Allow Lent to bring you the gift of reconnection with God, for in that you will find peace. AMEN.