

## SENT TO ALL BATH ARCHDEACONRY CLERGY, READERS AND CHURCHWARDENS

Dear Colleagues

I am writing to say an enormous thank you for all that you have been doing and continue to do in the roles you hold in the Bath Archdeaconry. Thank you and I'm praying for you in the work you do, the dilemmas you face and the leadership and pastoral care you are offering.

I write this on Ash Wednesday, and have just deleted the Facebook app from my phone and tablet for the duration of Lent. It feels somewhat of a relief if I'm honest. I waste too much time on it. I will miss the funny posts that put a smile on my face. The last tweet I saw today on Twitter was from the Political Editor of the Liverpool Echo who wrote this: *"So I'm not getting a vaccine next week – was feeling weird about why I'd been selected ahead of others so rang my GP to check. Turns out they had my height as 6.2cm rather than 6ft 2, giving me a BMI of 28,000!"* I don't know about you, but right now I need cheering up, and that did the job this morning. If I'm honest, I've found the last few weeks the toughest of all. I'm struggling with the thought that our summer holiday plans probably won't now happen. My motivation and energy levels have felt pretty low. And I feel a bit guilty. I confess I was so encouraged when I saw a Facebook post from a fellow vicar yesterday who said *"Does anyone else feel like they are running on empty with the constant demand to innovate and just keep the show on the road ... the thought of this going on for another six months before we get back to proper full worship is very daunting. The question is how we are going to keep things on the road and stay sane at the same time?"* Sometimes it just helps to know you are not the only one feeling it at the moment! That post received lots of 'Amen's' in the comments.

However yesterday, I began my Lent discipline, joining some clergy on-line virtually 'walking in the footsteps of Jesus' in the Holy Land – a virtual pilgrimage. We started in the wilderness. For Jesus it's the place of temptation. I've always found one line of the Lord's prayer slightly perplexing: *"lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one"*.

Does God really lead us to temptation? Well, according to the gospel writers, it's exactly what happens to Jesus. We are told that it was the Spirit who led him into the desert to be tempted. Sometimes God actively tests our faith. Maybe this last year has been a time of testing, of shaking up, of asking us: do you really trust me? Are you still committed to me, even when it's rough? Biblically, wilderness has played a variety of roles, but testing was part of the picture for the people of Israel. They wanted to go back to the past to avoid its challenge. Oh how we'd like to turn the clocks back from this wilderness experience we are going through in lockdown! And yet God was frustrated with them. He was leading them onto something new, something altogether better. Yet they preferred the past. That challenges me. And it struck me that wilderness/desert testing is a necessary part of building real hope. Romans 5 reminds us that suffering produces patience, patience produces character and character produces hope and that "hope does not disappoint". What strikes me about Jesus is that he enters the place of wilderness and temptation in the PRESENCE of the Spirit, but he leaves the place of wilderness and temptation (having resisted the urge to give up and settle for more material comfort) in the POWER of the Spirit. Jesus leaves the wilderness ready and equipped to embrace all God has planned for his future ministry. Maybe I need to see this wilderness time as something God has led me into, a place where he wants to test my resolve to trust him, to follow him, to pursue him.

And maybe the impact of the lockdown might be that I leave it full of the power of the Spirit. It's hard to imagine it right now. I'm sure it was hard for Jesus in those long, hot, hunger and thirst-filled 40 days. But he emerged full of hope, full of resolve, in the power of the Spirit. I may still be at lowish ebb – but I suddenly feel I have a bit more hope – Lord, may it be so!