

Dear friends,

I received an email last week offering me a covid-19 vaccination from the Diocese. A limited number of vaccines had been offered to the church by the NHS because we are involved with lots of face-to-face work with funerals etc. so I had mine on Monday afternoon. As I have two more funerals on the go, it feels good to be offered the protection so early, even though I am a mere stripling!

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday – the beginning of Lent.

The service to mark the start of Lent for the RMC is the **Book of Common Prayer service at 9.30am at St. Peter's this morning**. There will be no Ash applied this year for obvious reasons. I will be presiding this Wednesday as I will at all future Wednesday communion services - unless on holiday!

Although we tend to think of Lent as being synonymous with Jesus's time in the wilderness, it didn't actually start like that. It was a time of preparation for all those people who were to be baptised on Easter Sunday (this was the practise in the early church) and it was soon realised that this time would also be useful for any Christian whether they were new or mature so it was extended and promoted as being useful for anyone.

Sunday 21st February – 1st of Lent.

This Sunday I will be presiding at the 8am and 10am services at St. Peter's, Rev. Margaret Scrivener at the 9.30 am service at All Saints and Rev. Chris Cant will preside at St. Michael's Otterton.

Genesis 9: 8-17. What is significant to me is that the covenant, mentioned four times, is with all creation. God is not simply the God of human beings but the God of the entire created cosmos. This for theists, carries implications for how we treat both animals and the world around us. One way of dealing with human perversity is to try and destroy it (via the Flood) and the other is to wean the human race off of perversity towards a love of peace and justice, an example of God's Grace, signified by the rainbow.

1 Peter 3: 18- 22. A common icon in Eastern Christianity, is of the risen Christ standing over the entrance to hell, using the cross to span the fissure and pulling up people either out of their graves or sometimes out of death

itself into the light (see image below). This is a graphic illustration of this mysterious passage where Jesus reaches even down to the already dead (and presumably judged “in the time of Noah”) and pulling them to life and light. The forgiveness and Grace of God knows no bounds.

Mark 1: 9-15. The wilderness is a place of exile, distress and testing. The Jews wandered for forty years in the wilderness before alighting upon the promised land and Jesus was similarly tested for forty days before starting his ministry. A time of distillation of the essential message he carried for the world and a forging of his character and incorruptibility. A season of retreat, challenge, testing and growth remains with the church as a whole through the practice of “retreats” and the more widespread notion of an annual Lenten discipline.



The Harrowing of Hell.

For those who knew Hanneke Coates’ daughter Yasmin at All Saints, it is my sad duty to report her death this weekend. I have spoken to Hanneke, who herself has suffered another fall, and she has nothing but praise for her helpful neighbours and just desires all of our prayers at this terrible and testing time.

Thought for the day

I’ve used the word “Hell” a few times today but it may surprise a lot of people to hear that the word never appears in the Bible at all. It is an extra-Biblical word/concept that emerged at around 725AD and is a Germanic word. In the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) they used the concept “Sheol” – the place of the dead – which entailed no judgement or differentiation on merit – it

was simply where everyone went when they died and was a place of darkness, silence and forgetfulness. In the Septuagint (Greek) version of the Old Testament (70BC) they translated Sheol in the OT text as “Hades” which is a concept taken from Greek mythology.

In the New Testament wherever you encounter the word “Hell” depending on which translation you use it will usually be a translation of the word Gehenna (occurs 12 times). Gehenna was an actual physical place – the rubbish dump just outside Jerusalem where fires were common and human sacrifice had once occurred. Lepers and other outcasts were often sent there. “Hades” is the next most popular word translated as Hell and this a term taken from Greek mythology . In one instance “Tartarus” is translated as Hell as well. This is another term taken from Greek mythology.

Both the Western and Eastern branches of Christendom shy away from describing Hell as an actual place but tend to see “heaven and Hell” as varying degrees of intensifying experience of God’s presence entirely dependent on the spiritual state of the one who is dwelling in God. Hell, in this definition is a self-imposed deep loneliness having rejected the love of God. My own view tries to hold together both the desire of God that all things are saved with the human gift of free will to resist the salvation on offer. So, while I cannot say that I know for certain that all things are saved (therefore “Hell” exists) but that it is a perfectly reasonable Christian hope that all things *are* saved.

The Prayer for Today is by John Donne (1573-1631) and is often used at funerals.

**Bring us O Lord at our last awakening
Into the house and gate of heaven,
To enter into that gate and dwell in that house
Where shall be no darkness nor dazzling but one equal light
No noise nor silence, but one equal music,
No fears nor hopes, but one equal possession,
No ends or beginnings, but one equal eternity
In the habitations of your glory and dominion,
World without end. Amen**

Love and peace,
Martin

Please note my new email address is vicar@rmcommunity.co.uk