

Letter from the Rural Dean

As April begins we are most of the way through Lent and Easter is on the horizon. The days are lengthening, perhaps even warming, and signs of new life are everywhere. I always find it heartening to remember that 'Lent' comes from a word which means 'spring season', which beautifully connects the time of year in which Lent falls with its encouragement to think about spiritual renewal as the Church prepares to celebrate Easter.

If we need any further encouragement to contemplate this, we might recall that some of the key scenes which take us from the solemnity of Holy Week into the alleluias of Easter are set in a garden. After their final meal together on Maundy Thursday, Jesus takes three of his disciples into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with him. But it's too much and they fall asleep whilst Jesus wrestles with what lies ahead, and when he is arrested they run away. Then on Good Friday Pilate, the Roman governor who has overseen Jesus' crucifixion, gives Joseph of Arimathea permission to bury his body. We hear that "in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden there was a new tomb." There Jesus is laid to rest.

Dorothy Frances Gurney, 20th century poet and hymn-writer, famously wrote "one is nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth." It's perhaps less well-known that those lines come from a poem telling the story of God's love for humanity from the Garden of Eden onwards and, poignantly, it continues speaking of God's heart: "He broke it for us in a garden, under the olive trees." The poem is not so much about the wonders of creation as about God's willingness to love to the broken-hearted end, which is where we find Jesus on Good Friday. But of course that's not the end. The Good Friday garden becomes the Easter garden as Jesus' followers realise that, mysteriously and thrillingly, he is still with them. Hope suddenly abounds.

Wherever you find yourself this Easter, in whatever place or circumstance, I hope that in its mystery, wonder and promise you might glimpse something of that all-embracing, limitless, welcoming and compassionate heart of love that we call God.

With my prayers and good wishes,
Sheila Banyard, Rural Dean