

LENT (1) 2023

I am glad we managed to squeeze in our Singapore evening before the first Sunday of Lent - just! Now we get down to the serious business of consuming less, and giving more. One smart child at St Mary's Primary said to me the other day, "I am going to give up avocados, Fr Nigel...because I don't like them anyway!" I feel much the same about turnips, but I didn't dare say that to our local MP on Friday night, at our special Vigil of Prayer for Ukraine!

What marks out these next 40 days (excluding Sundays) is how much more serious we can be than simply 'inventing' another New Year's resolution, and how much more honest we can be about building up our spiritual lives in fruitful ways. Yes, of course, our challenges to support our link Diocese of Kagera each day are good, and well-intentioned. I hope that, as well as raising a large Benefice total for Easter, we will learn more about our common concerns about sustainability: our sources of energy as well as our demands upon them; how we grow and produce food in the middle of a climate crisis; how we trade fairly or unfairly or, how much we simply waste...But where this season really 'bites' is the challenge across our Churches and, international boundaries, to grow prayerfully and spiritually in new and fruitful ways. There are still out there, some unhelpful memories of our colonial past. The entry in our challenge booklets for Wednesday in Holy Week reads: "Not just a polite handshake and cup of tea for visitors in Kagera. Our bishops were welcomed with marching bands, choirs, dancers and

sumptuous feasts.” Now I assume this wouldn’t happen in the Season of Lent – but there is more than a hint here that perhaps we need to be more excited, adventurous rather than ‘settled’, about ‘faith matters’ than we sometimes appear, under our ‘British guise’.

And so we need to plan for Holy Week in more creative ways before we give our apologies: that we are too busy on Easter Saturday night, or, and I have heard this, sadly, “We don’t like to come to Church on Good Friday because it is such a sad day.” This is not music to my ears! The reason Jesus went out into the wilderness was to prepare for his own death and resurrection. The cruelties and hardships of the desert prepared him for both. And there is a real sense making that kind of journey, that following in Christ’s footsteps, is a **necessary** one. We are not literally going into a desert of self-denial any more than we are going into an Eden of plenty where we can skip each and any hardship. But perhaps Our Lord is asking us, and challenging us, to see Lent and Easter as intrinsically melded, as fasting gives way to feasting. And this, remember, is a shared journey from start to finish, as Church, as the people of God, bonded and bound together. Lent is not, I believe, a time or season for individual piety. Neither is it a time to ‘beat ourselves up’ with so much guilt or burden ourselves with the worry of whether we like ‘**fat** turnips’ or ‘**enormous** ones’ (Roald Dahl would have liked slim ones best)! Today’s collect says more prayerfully, as we set out on a new LENT: “Almighty God, as you know our weakness, so may we know your power to save.” Amen.