

LENT 1.

I received an e-mail recently with the headline:

“Discoveries waiting to happen” which led on to declare, ‘There’s no doubt about it, we have a big and broad range of wines for our members to select from, with new wines arriving all the time. This month Joanna Locke MW has re-bought an Alsace classic from Leon Beyer and a fragrant, spicy Douro red from Portugal, while elsewhere in Iberia buyer Pierre Mansour has unearthed a pure and vibrant gem from Galicia in north-west Spain. Our brand-new mixed case of big, bold but very fine reds is guaranteed to get anyone through the last of the colder days before spring finally arrives.’

Tempted, I wonder, as I am? For ‘spring’, read LENT, ‘Living each day nearer to God’.

At last week’s, first Lenten lunch, the emphasis was on simplicity and, afterwards, at the annual World Day of prayer, the chocolate biscuits were not moving fast because, I was told, people had ‘given them up’ for Lent, in the same way that I have ‘given up’ shaving!

On Ash Wednesday, we heard again the solemn words of our own mortality, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These words belong to ancient Christian tradition well before anyone could dismiss them as ‘too Roman’ or, ‘too High Church’. It is nothing of the sort but instead, straight talking about something utterly honest and

true. Our own mortality is something we have to contemplate and 'own' and commit to the Lord, because God alone is the One who creates us from the dust of the earth; God alone is the one who redeems us in the life to come!

And so, today's famous Gospel reading, is very much about 'discoveries waiting to happen' in Jesus' three encounters with the devil in the wilderness. And the backdrop and detail Dr Luke shares with us about Jesus: "He ate nothing at all during those days".

This new season of Lent is testing for us, so much so that we can be tempted to view it only in a negative way. Perhaps we need to change that mind-set and concentrate on how the Holy Spirit can lead us to worship more, not less; how we can discover more about how we might serve God and neighbour in this community, in new and exciting ways; how we can break out of so many other distractions or busy-ness? Psalm 91 is a good companion for us this week, read slowly every day. A chapter from our thoughtful Lent book which might reignite love for our greatest playwright, William Shakespeare – someone who knew a great deal about human suffering in the height of the plague years in the 1550s.

Sadness and the presence of death are all around us again as we watch and hear the cries of the brave Ukrainian people. But however useless we may feel, there are practical ways of helping, whether we provide a box of urgent supplies this week, whether we donate via the Bishop's 'World vision' website, and if we also dedicate our own prayer time and

family time to share the world's sorrows and light our own candles silently, for lasting peace. In this way we are part of something much bigger than our 'Woodbridge life' or 'Great Bealings life'; we are part of a truly catholic thread in communion with all the angels and saints: past, present and future. And again, at Friday's united day of world prayer, this piece of new 'biblical' music I had never heard before, weaved in and out of the liturgy like a mantra:

"For surely I know the plans I have for you. The Lord said:

Surely I know the plans I have for you.

Plans for your welfare, plans to not harm you,

And to give you hope again.

For surely I know the plans I have for you."

That's what Lent tests us most of all or, I would prefer to say, 'invites us' to discover, like we would a new, fine wine. Taste and see, this Lent, the different ways in which God calls us to travel hopefully, faithfully, and sacrificially – even when we are lead out of our comfort zone, especially so.

AMEN.