

With apologies for mangling T.S. Eliot, who is more usually quoted at Christmas, ‘A hard coming we had of it. Just the worst time of the year.’ Truly, it has been a hard coming. This time last year, as we staggered through an isolated Holy Week and a curtailed and lonely Easter, we had no idea what was coming. Weirdly, it was like the events leading up to tonight’s Old Testament reading, but with us cast as the Egyptians. Would the plague strike us? If it didn’t get to us, what about our friends and colleagues, family, neighbours? Then we thought maybe we had survived, but along came renewed afflictions, the one from Kent, the South African version, the Brazilian variant. We ventured out – and were ordered back inside again. Even now our neighbours across the Channel are battening down for another outbreak. But for us, just possibly, we can be Israelites, venturing out cautiously for a pass-over from rigid constraints to a prospect of freedom. If so, we are fortunate, and we give heartfelt thanks to the scientists, medical staff, vaccine manufacturers, key workers and community volunteers who have brought us to this point.

Perhaps at this point we should look back at the land we are leaving and consider what we are taking with us. Not the objects of silver and gold given to the Israelites by their Egyptian neighbours who couldn’t wait to see the back of them. In that awful expression people use these days, it has been a ‘learning experience’. We have learned so much about ourselves: how we cope with isolation or with being cooped up with the same people for far too long. We’ve each learned how we manage apprehension: is it just a tickle or a Covid cough? Have I got a headache because I’ve been staring at a screen for too long, or is it the start of something nasty? Many of us are fearful: is it safe to hug my daughter? Should I risk going out? That jogger isn’t keeping away from people. Some of us have encountered insecurity, loss of work or of income that we had never expected. Some of us have experienced depression for the first time; some have learned about worry, desperation and grief in agonising ways.

But we have learned other things too, which we shall gratefully take with us. The pleasure of birdsong when there is no noise from traffic or aeroplanes. The greater awareness of the seasons, the importance of local shops, the amazing variety of front gardens, the vital contribution made by people we rarely thought about before – delivery drivers, cleaners, supermarket staff, IT gurus. Most of all, we have learned the value of community, be it neighbours looking out for each other, the street WhatsApp group, the virtual coffee klatch or the Zoomed prayer group. ‘I give you a new commandment’, said Jesus, ‘that you love one another.’ This last year has seen a remarkable outpouring of genuine, unselfish love, particularly among people who were strangers to each other. The friendly word, the offer of help, the unexpected phone call ‘just to make sure you’re OK’, the individual acts of charity and the phenomenal response to fund-raising efforts. As we move out into a sort-of-promised land, these are the objects of silver and gold to take with us, and to pass on to others.

Love goes two ways. To love one another we must both give and receive. Do you remember how it felt to receive an unexpected little burst of love? Receiving is much more difficult than giving for many of us – and perhaps one of the challenges of getting older is accepting the changing balance between the two. Peter wasn’t comfortable receiving love. When Jesus wanted to wash his feet he argued, just as he had done many times before and would do again that same evening. Was it pride, embarrassment, genuine humility? Maybe all three? For me, and I’m sure for Fr David and Fr Adam, there is something fundamental missing from this evening’s service. It is symbolised by the jug, bowl and towel on the altar, but somehow on Maundy Thursday it is the actual foot-washing that matters. In ordinary times we regularly touch other people’s hands, hug them and kiss them, but we never touch their feet. This is an extraordinarily intimate gesture. You are both symbolically and literally above me, but you let me do this. For love to be given, it must also be received. God so loved the world that he gave his only son – but to complete the gift, the world must receive it, one

person at a time. I can't force you to let me wash your feet; God can't force you to take his son into your heart. The offer is made; you decide whether to accept it. You could kick both of us in the teeth.

A hard coming we have had of it. It may have been difficult, this past year, to keep the faith, given all the difficulties and disappointments we have experienced. But this is a moment of renewal. 'I give you a new covenant', said Jesus, and at the same time he gave us a new way to celebrate and remember that covenant. So when you come to the altar this evening to receive communion, or when you say the quiet personal prayer of acceptance at home, you will be agreeing once more to accept that covenant, the love of God that it promises, and the obligation to share the love with others. We may not yet be quite out of the clutches of the plague and safely across the Jordan, but we are on our way to the Promised Land.