

## A LETTER FROM LAURA

Dear All,

When we think about February there may be two events that spring to mind. The first is the beginning of the Christian season of Lent, marked by Ash Wednesday, and the second – probably the more prominent one in our culture – is Valentine’s Day.

Perhaps we see no similarities between the two. Lent is an important and prayerful season of penitence and self-denial. Valentine’s Day is a commercial event about romantic love - its religious attachment to a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century priest named ‘St Valentine’ has become almost forgotten and is steeped in mystery and uncertainty.

But this February, after a whole year of deep challenge, there is perhaps a common theme between the two that might help us to use this season of Lent as a time to heal and to look forwards. That common theme is love.

As we begin our journey through Lent, it can still feel like a long time until we celebrate Easter. The days continue to be shorter and colder, and we may feel that we should use the Lenten season to be disciplined, learn new habits and give up something we really enjoy.

But perhaps this year, having already been expected to adopt many new habits and give up a significant amount of the things we enjoy, we need to live through Lent in a way that is lovingly gentle and prayerful - focusing more simply on God’s unfailing love for us and what that means.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, we read:

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” Luke 15:20

This parable brings us so much hope. It assures us that God the Father sees us even whilst we are still a long way off – despite our imperfections and tendency to fall short. Also, it tells us that God sees us through eyes of love.

Our Lenten practice invites us to strip back to the basics during this season, to understand ourselves better and to turn away from the dark places in our lives. But better understanding who we are does not have to mean beating ourselves up with guilt over what we have been doing wrong and giving up everything left that we enjoy. Instead, we can simply commit this season to remembering that we are beloved children of God – and believing it! As we focus on God’s love for us, it may be that we do feel gently led to lay aside our concerns and our failings and leave them with God in prayer.

Sometimes we let love in when we choose to rest and do those small things that spark our joy and give us peace. Perhaps that is particularly true this year. With God, we do not have to earn his love and we do not have to earn the right to rest and refresh.

John’s gospel records these words before Jesus begins his journey to the cross:

“Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.” John 13:1

As we begin our journey through Lent in a very difficult year, let us remember that enduring love for each of us that took Jesus to the cross. Let us focus on love - loving ourselves, loving each other and truly believing that we are loved by God. May this Lenten season gently remind us who we are in Christ, promote healing and bring hope as we look ahead to Easter.

Blessings,

**Laura**