



Ash Wednesday 2023

Dear friends,

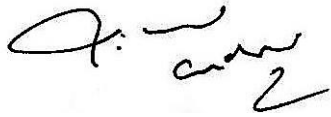
It seems scarcely imaginable, as I write, that it is almost exactly a year to the day since Russia invaded Ukraine. In my Lent letter last year I included a prayer written by Eduard Khegay, the Methodist Bishop for Eurasia, an area which covers both Ukraine and Russia. The prayer reflected the deep tragedy of the early stages of the war and referenced a painting entitled *Wounded Angel*. The past year has witnessed continuing acts of cruelty and crimes against humanity not just in Ukraine but in a whole series of wars and unresolved conflicts around the world. My colleague, John Howard, with whom I am working closely at the moment in the Darlington and Teesdale Circuit, told a story in the staff meeting the other week following his return from Israel-Palestine, of 13 year old boys in refugee camps carrying in their pockets instructions for their funerals should they be shot by Israeli soldiers. These are all situations of deep pain and sadness without easy solutions.

In Lent we are reminded of the fragility of our humanity. On Ash Wednesday many Christians throughout the world are ashed as a reminder of our common humanity: we are made of dust and to dust we will return. The themes of Lent also remind us of those who would misuse their power; of authorities, both religious and political, in constant conflict; of a humanity which for all it is made in the image of God, still wanders in darkness. This tragic sequence leads us to the ultimate reminder of the continuing presence of evil in our world as Jesus is led out to be crucified. The themes of death and darkness in Lent echo the tragedy and pain experienced in our world today.

Yet we cannot experience Lent without also reminding ourselves of Easter. Lent is a time of preparation so we must not lose sight of what we are preparing for. Eastern Orthodox Christians refer to Lent as a time of 'bright sadness', taking seriously the reality of the human condition whilst anticipating the new reality which breaks forth as Easter. For my Lent discipline, I have decided to read slowly and prayerfully David Ford's magisterial commentary on the Gospel of John (published by Baker Academic). My first reading this morning placed me in John's Prologue, that magnificent passage which brings together reflection on the event of Jesus, the Word of God, at the beginning of all things, and the daring intimacy of the incarnation. In verse 5 we are reminded that the light of life, which is the light of all people, shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. It is a word of realism – the darkness is still with us – and a word of hope. The reading for this Sunday (Matthew 4:1-11) follows Jesus into the desert to be tempted. He faces choices which ultimately are about how he will exercise power and authority having been declared at his baptism as God's beloved Son. The choice he takes to follow God's way obediently and not to follow the world's way of power is, of course, something which will bring him

into conflict with authority and lead to his cross. But it is also a reminder that this is a bright sadness: his way will ultimately be vindicated. It is then a way which we are called to follow too, one step at a time, as we seek a world which radiates God's light and appears from the darkness.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Crow". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a stylized "C".

District Chair