

Dear friends,

It was my great hope to be back with you for Holy Week and Easter. However, my doctors have confirmed what I knew within myself already: that I am not yet fit to return. Sustained by your prayers, love and many gestures of kindness, I remain full of hope, confidence, and joy despite this; and a challenging past couple of months have left me unbowed.



I want to enthusiastically encourage you to throw yourselves into the beauty and wonder of Holy Week and Easter. Clear your diary! To my surprise and delight, as I have become more familiar with human frailty and the power of sin and death in the world, my sense of Christ's gentle presence through all things has grown.

I write this not out of some sense of what a priest should think and "project", but from sincere and growing personal experience which (I am ashamed to say) has often run contrary to my deepest, flimsy expectations! I am not engaged in some fight nor battle with cancer or darkness or whatever; rather I have submitted myself to God's love and grace, which is to say I have abandoned myself to life. I cannot be bowed to death and sin, if I am already prostrate before life and love! I remain unbowed.

None of this depends on our own strength: in any state of weakness, we can simply abandon ourselves to love in Christ. What wonder! Therefore, Christians need not bow to violence, injustice, despair and death - remember this when the world's contemporary horrors press on you. We live in - and *live out* - this hope because of the journey Jesus makes through and beyond human weakness, failure and hopelessness in Holy Week and Easter.

If Jesus walks with me through my own minor trials and troubles, then who am I to refuse the opportunity to walk with him from his triumphal entry to Jerusalem to Golgotha to the garden tomb and beyond?

For those who are interested in my health, I am experiencing an extremely rare and severe reaction to immunotherapy for a form a cancer which was previously untreatable. Immunotherapy encourages the immune system into a state of hyperactivity in the hope that it will learn to attack cancerous cells in the same way it learns to attack viruses and bacteria. In my case, the immunotherapy drugs were extremely successful at provoking my immune system, which consequently began to attack various parts of me: particularly my brain. This has meant that I have been repeatedly hospitalised with Meningitis. Steroids and now other drugs are being used to encourage my immune system to "forget" this particular learned response. A balance is being sought so that the Meningitis will stop, but the cancer cells will still be attacked. During this period of balance-finding, the effects and consequences of the Meningitis may affect me from time to time. The past couple of months have been challenging with occasional sight and hearing problems, hallucinations, migraines, and problems with speech, concentration and understanding. But after each set back, I have been able to recover slowly - and, overall, the situation is improving even if the road ahead may not always be smooth. Crucially, however, any unpleasantness is simultaneously a tremendous sign of hope - it is an indication that my immune system is hard at work! Indeed, a scan has given an early indication that perhaps the cancer is shrinking. So my hope remains that though the journey is at times rough, the destination will be worth it!

It happens that I am writing this on the 30th anniversary of the ordination of women as priests in the Church of England – an event which allowed for the lavishing of much blessing and grace upon this parish. I ask that you please continue to support our exemplary clergy team, our wardens and all those with responsibility in the parish, just as you support each other.

I send you my love and warmest greetings – and the assurance of my prayers as well as my impatience to be among you again. In particular, I send greeting to those who have recently joined our community – it is a blessing to have you among us.

Finally, I am determined to be some part of the parish's Easter worship and have written a hymn to the tune *Blaenwern* about Mary Magdalene the "Apostle to the Apostles", which I dedicate to you:

Quietly God's glory rises,
Softly our salvation dawns;
See the sun sweep through the garden,
Morning's beams break between thorns.
Clothed with light, once barren branches
Now reveal their buds and blooms;
Dawn, dispelling fearful shadows,
Floods into an empty tomb.

In deep darkness Mary sought him,
Through uncertainty she wept;
Now those tears of desolation,
With the dew, day's glow reflect,
Now all absence becomes presence,
Now all shadows die in light,
Now a softly spoken, "Mary"
Turns dejection to delight.

Lord, like Mary in that garden,
May we seek and weep and find
Through all dread, all fear, all dimness
Gently, surely, your life shines!
Death of death and suffering's ceasing,
Pledges sealed in human wounds,
Send us racing out with Mary
To proclaim the empty tomb!

*dedicated to the people of Saint Leonard's
and the Parish of Lexden*

Yours, unbowed in faith and hope and love,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matthew". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'M'.

The Rev'd Matthew Simpkins, Priest in Charge