

## Monthly Letter, February 2021

### From the Dean of Salisbury



According to ancient tradition (!) the probationer choristers of the Cathedral celebrate Shrove Tuesday by cooking pancakes in the Deanery kitchen. Boys, girls, and staff members crowd around as lemons are squeezed, sugar is scattered, and pancakes are flipped. Some are caught and some are not: the presence of two Deanery tortoises in the corner of the room is always a significant distraction. Above the din I try to explain how once upon a time this was the day when all the household's butter and eggs were used up in readiness for the Lenten fast.

Pancakes eaten, we troop out into the back garden for a more solemn but no less fascinating ritual. The stacks of palm crosses collected from the congregation in previous weeks are thrown into a fire, and the probs are told about the ashing that will take place in the Cathedral the following day. Appetite and curiosity satisfied, the children return to school.

None of that will happen this year. Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday fall within the earliest dates envisaged for the ending of our current lockdown, and it seems inconceivable that we will be able to observe Lent – or, for that matter, Holy Week and Easter – in anything like the manner to which we were once accustomed. Like the butter and the eggs, like the probationers' pancakes, our routines, our traditions, our habits are being devoured by a pandemic which seems to go on and on.

And, we might ask, when all these have been devoured, what is left? The answer is: the ash. The gritty, resilient, irreducible residue that clings to the bottom of the barbeque when the palm crosses have been burnt and the flames have died down. It's this gritty, resilient, irreducible residue that we daub on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday. Ash is what remains when everything else has been taken away.

It makes you think. Ash which cannot be destroyed; ash which endures. This year of all years, could there be any more potent symbol of God's gritty, resilient, irreducible love for us?