

From the Revd Peter Hills

While very much a Methodist, I am also ecumenical at heart. It is only as a committed Methodist that I can begin to appreciate my brothers and sisters in Christ who come from a different stable, as it were. Each of us has something to learn from the others. Perhaps the best example of that within the Circuit is the way that Guildford Methodist Church has bonded with St Mary's, though both Godalming United Church and St Michael's Sheerwater have similar stories to tell. In my case, I have learnt from Anglicans and members of the United Reformed, Catholic, Baptist and Pentecostal churches, but also from the Orthodox tradition. I have attended worship in various Orthodox churches, encountered Orthodox communities in Cyprus and the Balkans, and did a module on Orthodox Worship and Spirituality as part of my in-service Diploma in Pastoral Theology.

The Orthodox churches seem to be distinct from those of the Christian west. We use different calendars, for a start. When most countries replaced the Julian with the Gregorian Calendar (and incidentally made 1 January the first day of the year) the Orthodox churches continued to operate using the old calendar. Thus when living in Cyprus I was able to celebrate two Easter Days, a week apart! And we all know that the Orthodox celebrate Christmas at our Epiphany, in January.

Lent is different, too. Western Christians begin a forty-day fast (excluding Sundays) on Ash Wednesday. The day before is a feast day in many parts of the world, named variously Mardi Gras; Carnival; or Shrove Tuesday (aka Pancake Day). Ash Wednesday is intended to be a day of penitence. We British are not good at sackcloth and ashes, but on that day even Methodists may gather for a solemn service including the imposition of ashes as a sign of repentance.

In the Orthodox tradition Lent is also a forty-day fast (including Sundays). There is no Ash Wednesday: Lent begins on a Monday – which in the Eastern tradition means the Sunday evening before. It follows a month-long preparation for Lent: the Sunday of the Tax Collector and Pharisee; the Sunday of the Prodigal Son; the Saturday of the Dead (= our All Souls Day) followed by the Sunday of the Last Judgement; Lent begins at the evening service (Vespers) On the Sunday of Forgiveness: the Expulsion of Adam from Paradise.

The Sunday of Forgiveness. I suppose it resembles our Ash Wednesday. Where it differs is on the emphasis: less on Confession and more on reconciliation. At the end of Vespers something rather beautiful happens: a Ceremony of Mutual Forgiveness. One by one members of the congregation come forward, kiss the icon of the day, prostrate themselves before the priest and ask for his forgiveness. Then the priest prostrates himself (he's always a 'he') before them and asks for their forgiveness. Finally, the congregation may mingle, as we may do when the Peace is exchanged

during Communion; but in this case it is to ask one another for forgiveness. The thinking behind this, in the words of Hugh Wybrew (in his book *Orthodox Lent, Holy Week and Easter*) is that

by giving and accepting forgiveness from each other, Christians prepare themselves to receive God's forgiveness. Truly to forgive is one of the most difficult ways of expressing Christian love; and accepting forgiveness is one of the hardest forms of Christian humility. Few better ways of beginning the observance of Lent could be devised than this.

I agree. Wouldn't it be lovely if, on Ash Wednesday or the First Sunday in Lent, there was less stress on penitence and more on forgiveness? The two belong together, of course, but to make such an act of mutual forgiveness – less the icon-kissing and prostration, of course – part of our Lent observance would, I believe, be richly rewarding, and far more meaningful than giving up chocolate!

Blessings,

Peter

Good News/Resources

Church at the Margins in the Thames Valley

What did listening to the community look like for the Thames Valley? Pauline from Burnham explains what changed as a result.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3NNjGzwhcw>

Coffee Morning

Jeannette Curtis is organising a coffee morning to raise money for **Target Ovarian Cancer**. It will be at Walton Methodist church from 10am to 12 noon on Saturday March 11th. Jeannette has chosen March 11th as according to the Target Ovarian Cancer website, <https://targetovariancancer.org.uk/> 11 people die of ovarian cancer every day. They are hoping that by concentrating on 11 it will help people to remember.

Last year Rev Julia Monaghan and Jeannette did this together, so this year Jeannette is doing it in her memory.