

Ash Wednesday 2015 St. Marylebone

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As many of you know, I spent much of January in Oman. As my guide, I took with me Wilfred Thesiger's *Arabian Sands*, his record of his extraordinary journeys through the parched Empty Quarter of Arabia, part of which lies in the Sultanate of Oman.

A decorated war hero Thesiger was also deeply complex and troubled character who had become increasingly repulsed by what he described as the softness and rigidity of Western life, with its "machines, calling cards and meticulously aligned streets."

In the spirit of T. E. Lawrence, he found peace in the world's desert places and he set out to explore the wildernesses of Arabia, traveling among the Bedu, most of whom had never seen a European.

Travelling on foot and by camel, often for months on end, with nothing more than a handful of rice and few dates between him and starvation Thesiger's travelogues are still gripping reading, all the more so if

one reads them in the places through which he travelled in the 1940 s and 1950s.

Thankfully, as well as Thesiger's book, I had an experienced guide - and a Toyota Landcruiser at my disposal, as I ventured into the Empty Quarter the Wahiba Sands.

Ash Wednesday is a time when the Church asks all her children to follow Christ's example and to make a journey into the wilderness, not literally, but at least spiritually.

We are challenged to leave behind all those things which entrap and ensnare us; the things that waylay us spiritually and to better-know our reliance and our dependence upon God's love and mercy.

We can, with relative ease, give up chocolate or alcohol for Lent, and, if these are truly the things which entrap and ensnare us, the things which divert inexorably from our walking with God, then all well and good, but I really rather doubt that many of us can honestly say that a chocolate biscuit or a Gin and Tonic really are the things which really stand in the way of our Christian journeying.

From the earliest Christian times, the Church has tried to reflect on the things that truly make us stray off course and lose our way, and she has named them as wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony – the seven Deadly Sins.

I suppose we could put the odd Gin and Tonic and the occasional chocolate biscuit down under gluttony, but to do so is to miss the mark by a very wide margin!

What we are asked to do in Lent – indeed what we are asked to do 365 days-a-year-for-as-long-as-we-live – is not to give up chocolate or reduce our intake of alcohol but to pay careful attention to those sins which can, if not checked, destroy God's life of grace and love in us.

Whether or not we eat the odd chocolate biscuit – even a whole pack of chocolate biscuits in a single sitting, really is neither here nor there and we do ourselves no favours if we think that the Lenten task is really about such ephemeral and unimportant things.

What we need to be asking ourselves day by day, year by year, is: how is my life lived in and by God's gracious love and grace? How am I doing in living out my baptismal promises day by day? Where *am I* truly and honestly in my all-important relationship with Jesus?

Only if we are prepared to ask ourselves such deeply searching questions does Lent have any meaning for us.

If we really set too and get down to what really matters, we might need far more than a chocolate biscuit and a G&T!

Have a holy and happy Lent!

Amen.