

From the Vicar - March 2025

I'm writing this on Valentine's Day – Friday 14th February.

Some of you may know that Valentine's Day is a bitter-sweet celebration for me, as my mum died in a road traffic accident on this day in 2005. This year, the anniversary has been weighing on my mind more than usual – possibly partly because of the round number (20 years), but I think, also, because of my shifting gender identity.

I am a little sad that my mum never got to know me as 'Tom' – though several friends have reassured me that she probably had some idea of my true identity or, at least, wouldn't be particularly surprised by my discovery that I am Tom.

On Valentine's Day, many of us celebrate love. For couples, this might be romantic love. For those who are single, divorced or widowed, I believe that self-love and self-care are particularly important on this day. I also firmly believe that all of us – regardless of relationship status – should strive to love our neighbours, and be kind to everyone we meet.

This morning, I had the privilege of presiding at an early morning Eucharist, in the Edward King Chapel at the College. It was exactly where I needed to be, on a day which I knew would contain a mixture of emotions, when my mum's death, and my sense of loss, would contend with my desire to celebrate the love which Martin and I continue to share for one another.

During the service, I read out a passage about St Valentine's Day, including the words: "For Christians, this day marks an acknowledgement of an all-loving God who blesses those who love one another, as Jesus implored his own disciples to do." We are called to love one another, not only on Valentine's Day, but 365 days a year.

Yesterday, many from the village gathered in All Saints Church, and later in the college, to give thanks for the life of Mary Palmer. We listened to the well-known passage from 1 Corinthians 13 – about the

supreme importance of love; and I reflected, in my sermon, on how Mary embodied love and kindness, and set a positive example for us all.

Perhaps those of us who knew Mary could strive to follow her example, and love and be kind to one another, despite differences?

As part of my ministerial development and ongoing theological reflection and learning, I have been reflecting recently on my identity; on why God called me to be a priest; why God called me to be Vicar of Cuddesdon, Garsington and Horspath; and what my priorities should be during this time of transition.

During the ordination service, priests are reminded that they are called, “With all God’s people ... to tell the story of God’s love,” so one of the reasons God has called me to be a priest, and to be your Vicar, is to tell the story of God’s love to the people of Cuddesdon, Denton, Garsington and Horspath.

I wonder if God also called me – Tom – here to cause the people of these parishes to reflect more deeply on that story of God’s love: to challenge assumptions, and cause us to consider important questions of identity – what does it mean to be a Christian, and a priest, and a Vicar, and a Trans-man? Can one be all of these things? What does it mean to be made male and female, and to be made in the image of God? Does God’s love have limits? Does God exclude anyone from his/their love, or is God’s love unconditional? How does God call us to respond to those with whom we fundamentally disagree; and whose very existence challenges our beliefs and values? How does God call us to respond to those whom we find it difficult to love?

These are challenging questions, and I suspect we may never reach agreement on the answers. Nevertheless, I still firmly believe that God called me to be a priest, and to be your Vicar, and I still count it an immense (though often challenging) privilege to be Vicar of Cuddesdon, Garsington and Horspath.

Please contact me if you would like a coffee and a chat, or a drink in The Bat and Ball, to discuss your life, faith, religious beliefs,

relationship with God, God's love, or anything else you would like to discuss with me.

God bless

Tom