

Dear Friends

## Forty Years

The number 'forty' occurs repeatedly throughout the Bible. Jesus, for example, was tempted for forty days in the wilderness prior to the start of his ministry (Mark 1:13); he appeared to his disciples over a period of forty days following his resurrection (Acts 1:3); Noah's flood lasted for forty days (Genesis 8:6); the Israelites were in the wilderness for forty years after their escape from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 16:35); Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai when he was given the Ten Commandments (Exodus 24:18); and the scouts whom he sent out to explore the Promised Land returned after forty days (Numbers 13:25). In Hebraic numerology certain numbers had a symbolic significance, and in the case of the number 'forty', it was generally used to denote 'a long time'.

I will 65 years old next September and retiring from full-time stipendiary ministry at the end of that month. There are a number of reasons why I felt 2018 was the right year for me to do this, but Jane, my better half, has reminded me that it will also coincidentally mark the fortieth anniversary of my ordination as a deacon in the Church of England (- 39 years since I was priested and 9 years since we arrived in Snodland).

Bearing in mind the significance of the number 'forty' in the Bible, it could be concluded that forty years of ministry is 'a long time', a significant proportion of my life. It could also be observed that many who pursue the same line of work, whatever that may be, for this length of time, can become so wedded to what they do that they regard it as an integral part of who they are, and find it difficult to imagine themselves doing (or being) anything else. The idea of retiring from this work and having to cope with the subsequent changes to their pattern of life can be frightening and disconcerting.

I do not think that this will be an issue for me. Whilst my work as a priest certainly plays a central role in my life at the moment, and I hope that I will be able to exercise a ministry of some kind during the course of my retirement, my *identity* should not depend upon this. As a Christian I am, like everyone else, first and foremost a child of God. *That* is my primary identity, my most fundamental source of meaning and self-worth, and living as a child of God is therefore what I am fundamentally about. Everything else may change, but my relationship with him as my heavenly Father will remain what it always has been – unaltered. As St. Paul so beautifully said in his letter to the Christians in Rome:

“Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry ‘Abba, Father’. The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” (Romans 8:14-16)

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