Over the last week or so it feels as if I have been so to speak dwelling in the flesh again. Before you rush off to ring the College Principal or the Archdeacon, please let your ordinand explain!

On Saturday 4 July I had my hair cut. My son Theo and I arrived to join the queue outside the barbers in Cherry Hinton at 7.20 in the morning. We were an amazing ninth in the queue. We wondered if we would have been first if we had got up earlier. I suspect not as there was a gentleman closer to the door who had arrived with his portable seat. By the time the barber’s opened the queue reached back to the mini roundabout opposite the end of the parade of shops past Tesco. Inside it felt safe, socially distanced and sanitised between customers. One could feel the excitement, gratitude and joy for a service we had taken for granted. No longer. I noticed generosity with the tips.

On the following Monday I went to the Queen Edith pub with Theo. The pub had not opened on the Saturday so as to miss the initial rush to be safe. We sat outside. The landlord and bar person and customers were again joyful.

These were strange experiences after so many months in lock-down which continued social distancing did not diminish much at all. I appreciate that some of our bothers and sister in Christ here at St James are still some way from being conformable to share in what before March would have been simple commonplace human events. Our Lord certainly shares our humanity and frequently Jesus is described as accepting hospitality and partaking in such commonplace events.

Or as Paul puts it Jesus came in the likeness of our sinful flesh.

When I first read through our reading from Roman’s today, as ever with parts of Paul, I had to go back through carefully. I realised this passage was not so much about sinful flesh as a message of great hope for Christians. Paul is giving us the essentials of what it means to be a Christian.

Our very nature itself holds us back from being able to do God’s will for us. Our sinful flesh holds us back and we cannot do it ourselves. God has to send us his Son who was in the beginning. In the likeness of flesh. Real flesh. Not to despise our flesh but share in it and to show us the true potential of our humanity as persons made in the image of God.

Paul as a Jew and now a Christian makes it clear that God has done what the law could not do alone. But real care is needed here. My course has taught me that Jews do not obey the law to in some sort of way curry favour with God, but in gratitude for and responding to his blessing. Psalm 119, which was the alternative today, makes it clear. Joy comes from following God’s teaching and that human beings need divine help built upon a strong personal relationship with God.

Paul emphasises that through Christ’s ultimate act of death on the cross and resurrection we have been set free. The spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ is in us. We who are baptised are in the Spirit and that Spirit dwells In us. Paul fully assures us that we will be raised like Christ.

Matthew, however, gives us some warnings. The parable of the sower reflects the vagaries of agriculture through what happens to the seed. We interpret this as a story about the mixed effects of Jesus’ message. But they are also a warning to us. Beware of being led astray – the devil’s activity as Jesus puts it. Beware of buckling under trial and adversity. Beware of an inappropriate love of worldly things.

Basically, we need to be centred on the pure love of God to understand the ways of the Kingdom.

The reading in Isaiah reassures us. This is a new understanding of God’s word. The word is creative and will accomplish God’s purpose and bring about what has been prophesied. It is a comparison of God’s event begetting word with rain that descends from above to fertilise the seed and vegetation. Just as this rain falls and does not return to the heavens until it has given life so will God’s prophetic word that issues from his mouth will not come back unfulfilled. As Christians the Son of God, Christ, is the Word of God and if we follow our calling, listening to the Risen Christ then his words by his grace will take root within us, then the promise of Isaiah will be fulfilled – we will be made fertile and fruitful. Jesus is seed and sower!

But what does this mean for us here and now? How do we make sure that we are receptive to Gods word so that it grows abundantly in us?

Clothed in the love of God we step out in to the world filled with joy. Some may even find us a little crazy but being filled with the joy of the Sprit we respond with love. We must try to see in all people God’s image in his creation.

The rest simply follows as God’s word accomplishes his will in us. Yes, we can pray and reflect. Reflection is important to give thanks and also look at the less positive moments, recognise our moods and desires which if unchecked can become habitual attitudes. The attitude we try to cultivate through worship and prayer is that which results is love in action. By seeing people resolutely in God’ image, we will find ourselves simply responding by offering to each other, all neighbours, the hospitality of attention that Christ gives us.

Recently I had a conversation with a friend about how he was having some difficulty with someone else. Sometime later that day I rang him back and apologised I had not listened properly. I was assured I had, but I demurred. I had not fully appreciated that something which would make me furrow my eyebrows was making my friend wonder whether it was because of the colour of his skin. If one thing Black Lives Matter has taught use we must start with listening to each other and understanding each other’s experience walking with them and not judging. This is at the root of seeing the other, being utterly for the other, as Jesus did and was.

One of my favourite stories about St Francis is that one day some hungry and presumably unsuccessful robbers came begging food. The brother guardian upbraided them as ruffians with harsh words. They were not ashamed to deprive others of the fruits of their labours but had audacity to come and devour that which had been given in charity to the servants of God. He sent them away empty handed. When St Francis came home he was horrified. He sent the brother guardian with some wine and bread to go and find the robbers and confess his sin. Of course, St Francis sent a message of repentance for the robbers and a promise continued hospitality. The robbers became brothers.

Well whether its small acts of love or big acts of love done for no other reason than the person is made in the image of God, just as Jesus Christ gave himself up unto death for us totally unmerited, the mountains and hills really will burst in to song and the trees of the field will clap their hands and all creation shout and sing for joy. Whilst things can seem impossible to us, for God all things are possible.

How has the current crisis changed how we see God working in us? How has coming gently out of lock-down been for you? How will we be the fertile ground so fruit of God’s word working in us springs forth with humility, love and joy?