

Plastic is absolutely everywhere.

As the Government this week began to explore banning certain single use plastics, some of us were reflecting on spending Lent trying to live out the #PlasticLessLent challenge.

Lent is the season of the Christian calendar when we try to live simpler lives, and this often means giving up something such as chocolate or alcohol. Sometimes people choose to take something up instead – though usually it's something they are quite keen to do! Ultimately, I like it if whatever I do goes on influencing me once Lent is over.

This year there has been much publicity about the effect of plastic. Shocking pictures have emerged of great piles of it washing up on beaches, often many thousands of miles from the place it was dumped. Pictures, too, of seabirds and marine mammals that have choked to death from eating plastics.

I began also to realise that we are only just beginning to understand their effects on our own bodies as we ingest plastic at an alarming rate – even from what is titled “pure mineral water” when it comes in plastic bottles.

I thought too of a time in Ghana and smelling the stench of plastic being burnt on a dump, clouds of acrid black smoke filling the atmosphere and doing goodness knows what to the health of those living in poverty in the surrounding shanty town.

If Lent is ultimately about trying to follow Jesus into his 40-day desert experience and use that time to listen more carefully to the echo of God, what message might that echo be carrying around the different communities of God's world? Might it be about living plastic-less?

So it was simple really. From the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday I started tweeting a daily suggestion from the Church of England about how to give up some plastic usage. I hoped that taking on a different thing each day would create a cumulative effect.

The media were interested and multiple interviews were offered. People were intrigued and, whilst I wondered if I was going on a bit too much about plastic, I had lots of encouragement. I had struck an itch and people wanted to know what they could do.

Some of the suggestions were straightforward. I had been given a reusable coffee mug a few months previously and this went in my briefcase and no disposable cups have been used since. I realised that for some of the suggestions I was already something of a convert: have a stock of plastic carrier bags to re-use; trying to refill a water bottle rather than buy a new one (with lapses - I'm trying to do better!) and, old-fashioned as I am, I use a fountain pen with a pot of ink so never use disposable plastic pens.

Other aspects just needed some careful planning: making sandwiches rather than buying them wrapped in plastic; refilling little shampoo bottles for trips rather than using the ones in hotels; and buying soap without micro-beads. I found a bamboo toothbrush, though a friend warned me to stick with plastic bristles as the wild boar's hair variety apparently gave her bad breath!

I was on the lookout for anything that was wrapped, capped or packed with plastic and searched for alternatives.

So what did I learn?

I was staggered by the terrible damage that our plastic usage is causing God's creation, including humans, on this single island home that we call planet Earth. It's nearly impossible to live plastic-free but we can all live with considerably less plastic if only we give it commitment.

Every piece of plastic I use will most probably outlive me by hundreds of years.

We can, one by one, and collectively as communities and nations and governments, do something about it. It's simple. We have to do something about plastic. We can do it – now let's do it!

The Bishop of Dudley, Graham Usher

Lent

A season (from Ash Wednesday until Easter Eve) of self-examination, penitence, self-denial, study, and preparation for Easter. Its duration (forty days plus Sundays) recalls the temptation of Christ in the wilderness.

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