

Dear Friends,

Amidst all the trauma of the Covid-19 pandemic I do hope that we are able to retain our sense of humour. This is difficult at a time when we miss seeing our close family and friends who live out of the area and also when news of bereavement and illness comes to us from the public media and personal correspondence. In no way would I wish to show disrespect to anyone, particularly those who are grieving. My thoughts and prayers go out to all who have reason to be sad.

For some people retaining a sense of humour is a way of coping with the stresses of the pandemic and occasionally the tedium of Zoom meetings. Indeed, the phenomenon of online video conferences has spawned a whole new possibility for humour to cheer us in these grey and chilly days.

It is never easy to chair a meeting of intelligent people who have their own opinions and are well able to see the flaws in another's reasoning. I think that if a numerical score was given to the challenge of chairing a meeting, then the number would be squared, or multiplied by itself, to represent the challenge of chairing a significant Zoom meeting. And so, it was that I watched in amazement the video clip from Handforth Parish Council, convened by the now famous Jackie Weaver. Her fame is so widespread that I read speculation on whether she might appear on Strictly Come Dancing! I have absolutely no idea of what the constitutional rights and wrongs of the meeting were, but as someone tasked with chairing church meetings, I felt for her as the parish council descended into an unruly shouting match. Nevertheless, the effect on the viewer watching the short video clip was disbelief mixed with a wry smile as the chaos unfolded.

Just when we thought that we had seen it all, another viral clip emerged. This one involved a lawyer on a Zoom conference assuring the judge, of all people, "I'm not a cat". One might say that the lawyer came within a whisker of contempt of court. It seems that he was using his secretary's laptop, which her daughter had used and had set up a filter which replaced the lawyer's face with the face of a cat. Clearly this was not in keeping with a serious court hearing. The maladroit lawyer had to confess to the hearing that he did not know how to turn off the cat-filter. Later, the judge refused to comment on whether he had kept a straight face, but it was noted that he had switched off

his camera. Apparently, Larry the Downing Street cat has Tweeted in response to this clip, asking if there is an App that will turn a cat into a lawyer!

Thankfully, I have less personal experience of Zoom disasters, although recently I was in a meeting (not involving members of this circuit) in which a young woman working at home suddenly exclaimed, "The dog's taken my computer mouse!". A few moments later I noticed that her large black Labrador puppy was sat on her knee watching the screen with interest.

It would be tempting, but perhaps uncharitable, to collect stories of Zoom mishaps from within the circuit. I have to say that the Zoom occasions I have attended within the Wey Valley Circuit have all been accomplished with much dignified aplomb. The whole phenomenon does raise the spectre of our gaffs and errors spreading beyond our own circle and swiftly becoming international jokes. The lawyer who had to tell the judge that he was not feline seems to have taken the ignominy in his stride. Yet how many of us would wish for our mistakes or confusions to be made public? We would naturally much prefer that it was our achievements and our finer attributes that found their way into the public arena.

Jesus had much to say about secrets being revealed and piety not being publicly paraded. In Matthew 6:16-18 He says some words that are especially pertinent as we begin our Lenten disciplines: *"Then, when you fast, don't look like those miserable play-actors! For they deliberately disfigure their faces so that people may see that they are fasting. Believe me, they have had all their reward. No, when you fast, brush your hair and wash your face so that nobody knows that you are fasting—let it be a secret between you and your Father. And your Father who knows all secrets will reward you."* Although Lent is a serious time of reflection and repentance, let's not get too morbidly introspective this year. It may be that for those who have suffered isolation since last March this would be too much to bear. I hope that our Lenten disciplines will be lightened by humour, because I do believe the gospels show that Jesus loved a good joke - and crucially He loves us all despite our gaffs.

God bless you,

Keith

Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent Minister (written 11/02/21)