

The Vicar's Letter

Dear Friends,

Recently the Bishop of London came to the end of a year in which he 'fasted from flying'. He had been challenged, during the course of the making of a television documentary, *God is Green*, to pledge not to fly for one year - and he'd accepted the challenge on the spot, thus encouraging his interviewer, Mark Dowd, immediately also to make the same undertaking. It was difficult - the Bishop had to miss three major international events (ironically, two of them to do with green issues), and he travelled by train to Romania for an ecumenical conference last September at double the cost of an economy flight. But he achieved what he had pledged - and thereby set a challenge to us all.

The easy and relatively cheap availability of flights is, of course, a blessing in many ways - bringing people together, enabling the kind of international study and exchange which is the lifeblood of a city like Cambridge, keeping families in touch from one end of the earth to the other, and encouraging us all to widen our cultural horizons. In the dull days of winter, many people have found it refreshing to take a short trip to somewhere sunnier; in the longer summer holidays foreign travel has become accessible to the many, and not just to the few. Some countries, of course, rely heavily on tourism for the health of their economies.

But to set against this there is the cost of flying in terms of greenhouse gas production, and the destruction of the ozone layer.

We all know there's an issue here. Airline travel is at least four times more polluting than high-speed train travel, per kilometre. On one flight, each passenger is responsible for putting as much 'greenhouse gas' into the atmosphere as he or she produces by use of an average car in a whole year.

Currently the Government is putting a Climate Change Bill through Parliament, for a reduction in the UK's carbon footprint of at least 60%, yet the effects of aviation aren't included in that calculation. And, no wonder! If current trends in airline usage continue, by 2050 that would account for an amount of pollution equivalent to the nation's entire quota.

Somehow this growth has to be halted. And perhaps in this matter it's no use looking to politicians to do the job for us - they will say that the expansion in aviation is the product of market trends. That's why they're building a new runway at Heathrow, and planning to expand Stansted. It's up to us, ordinary people, to create a different kind of market by making different kinds of demands. And perhaps also by resisting the blandishments of what has become cheap and relatively convenient (though nothing beats a train for taking you from city centre to city centre, and for offering you a geographical and cultural education on the way!).

I have thought long and hard before writing this next bit - because it's personal, and I don't think it's often a good thing to write much about one's self in a Vicar's letter. And I could easily be seen as being self-important, holier-than-thou, judgmental - or just plain laughable. But I feel I must take those risks, and say in public that, some time ago, I took the decision never to fly again purely for the purposes of leisure. I did that because I have become convinced that climate change is a real and present danger - indeed, more than a danger: already a malign force affecting and killing, directly or indirectly, many poor people in fragile environments. So I feel it's a matter of justice to do what I can to avoid making matters worse. I can't be content with making pious noises about caring for God's world: I have to make some hard decisions. And this was one I decided I could take.

And because a personal, private decision of my own would be totally ineffectual in combating destructive trends, I have to 'go public' (as the Bishop of London did), and invite other people to consider their own decisions with regard to taking the plane for holidays. Somehow, somewhere, I believe that a change in public opinion and public habit has to begin, and it would be good to think it could begin and spread among thoughtful and committed Christians.

Of course, I feel ambivalent about my decision in all sorts of ways. I have benefited hugely from foreign travel in the past, both in terms of relaxation and of education. And then, of course, I'm part of a family, and unilaterally taking a decision like this could seem akin to a vegetarian banning meat-eating for the whole household. (Fortunately for me. Malcolm grew up with a mother who hates flying so much that she will only do it in the direst emergency - and she spent many years as an expatriate finding other ways - some of them unusual - to travel between countries. So he's used to this kind of thinking.)

I do resent the fact that the market as it now stands has made the old ways of travel by surface either unavailable, in some cases, or in others, hugely expensive. Not so long ago a Eurorail card was a student's cheap ticket to adventure. Many of us will remember mounting the tall steps of a French train at Calais, and setting off across the continent with bottled water in our knapsack, and huge excitement in our heart, as the unfamiliar landscape unfolded. Now, of course, we can board a high-speed train at St Pancras, and not get off before Paris - but we'll have to save up quite a bit first! So, my personal decision can't be binding on the children when they reach student years and want to travel on a shoe-string, (though I do hope that the relative cost of train fares will come down again within my travelling-lifetime.).

In particular, I do want to make it clear that I respect the decision reached by each person, each family, in this matter. As I said near the outset, there are *pros* as well as *cons* to using aeroplanes for holidays as well as other purposes. I don't want to be the 'spectre at the feast' giving off bad vibes when people are happily discussing their foreign trips; nor do I want to harp on about this subject any more, either in writing, or from the pulpit. I simply felt I should take courage from the Bishop of London's example to lay myself on the line on this matter, in order to stir up a bit of thinking around these issues at this time of year - which is, after all, the traditional season both for making resolutions and for booking holidays!

With my prayers and best wishes for 2008 - may it be a year of Hope for us all,

Your friend and vicar,

Maggie Guite