Today’s readings point us to two difficult extremes of the Christian life that often as English Christians and Anglicans we can be somewhat embarrassed about.

It was a theme visible in how the two candidates for the leadership of the Conservative Party were willing to portray their Christian belief. During the campaign Jeremy Hunt was asked about his faith by *The Times* and said, “I sometimes pray. I’m like regular Church of England folk: it’s part of my life and my identity, but I don’t think it defines my politics.” Boris Johnson had been on the record rather longer, saying more colourfully, that his Christian faith was like the patchy radio reception in his car, “like Magic FM in the Chilterns, it comes and it goes”. Both clearly felt there was something of a virtue, at least in the eyes of their Conservative electorate, in being not too hot, not too cold – possibly drawing on some of the propagandist retelling of the myth of the Church of England as a sort of goldilocks *via media*. Or more likely, but also more disturbingly, it’s a sign of the “benign indifference” that Kate Fox in her brilliant book, *Watching the English*, says pervades the English ‘religious’ consciousness.

She narrates an overheard conversation between a teenager and her mother filling in a form in a doctor’s waiting room (2014: 486):

*The daughter asked, ‘Religion? What religion am I? We’re not any religion, are we?’*

‘No, we’re not,’ replied her mother. ‘Just put C of E.’

‘What’s C of E?’ asked the daughter.

‘Church of England.’

‘Is that a religion?’

‘Yes, sort of. Well, no, not really – it’s just what you put.’
As Kate Fox goes on to comment: “‘C of E’ is a default option. A bit like the ‘neither agree nor disagree’ box on questionnaires – a kind of apathetic, fence-sitting, middling sort of religion for the spiritually ‘neutral’.”

At times there can be something positive to be said for this sort of gentle, unassuming, reserved approach that at its best can allow for polite listening and hospitality. But the Scriptures are rather more challenging.

The Song of Songs takes the form of an *epithalamium*, an erotic wedding poem; but Christians down the ages, like Didymus of Alexandria, have been quick to note that only heretics like the long-forgotten fourth-century Arian, Seras, would be mad enough to read it on a purely fleshly level. For some rabbis, like Rabbi Akiba (*m.Yad.* 3.5), Song of Songs was not just holy like the rest of Scripture but the “holy of holies”; and it would go on to play a significant part in later Kabbalah texts and *merkavah* mysticism as telling the deep truth of encounter with God. For many early Christians, such as Hippolytus and Origen, Didymus and Gregory of Nyssa, it was read as a rich typology of Christ and his Bride, the Church, or of Christ and the individual Christian soul. Faith become love so deep that it passes words; the culmination of progress in a spiritual life that advanced from a moral wrestling with ethics to an intellectual illumination with physics and the natural order to a deep spiritual relationship becoming one with God.

Christ in Revelation 3:16 famously condemned the Church of Laodicea for being not too hot, not too cold, but being content with a lukewarm faith. And although it can run against every English instinct to simply not talk about that sort of thing, Song of Songs reminds us that faith should have at its heart intimacy – an aspiration and seeking out of a relationship with God that goes beyond doing the right thing or thinking the right thing to a deep mystical union within some great ‘cloud of unknowing’ which so transcends our words that the closest we can get is the stirring of erotic poetry.

“Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it” (*Song* 8:7)

“Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies” (*Song* 4:5)

“I am sick with love – O that his left hand were under my head and that his right hand embraced me!” (*Song* 2:5-6)

For many of us this is challenging enough, we’d prefer something cooler, more remote, more ‘English’ but it’s not the end of the challenge. This intimate unity with God, which
underpins our second reading’s call to be Christ-like, does not simply take us to comfort and glory but rather to fiery ordeal.

Our text from 1 Peter tells us, “Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you.” The Greek here is xenisesthe and xenos – not just don’t be surprised by ordeal but don’t think it’s alien or foreign. We might not all find ourselves like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the book of Daniel sent into a literal fire but testing and persecution belong to faith.

Jesus had warned his disciples this at the last supper – “”If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.” (Jn. 15:19–20)

For faith is not only intimate but always ‘cross-shaped’. There can be no Easter without Good Friday. Discipleship can be joyous and attractive like Easter but it is never without suffering, without critique, without the ordeal of the Cross which Christ challenges all those who would follow him to take up daily (Lk. 9:23). There are countless examples throughout history, some rather closer to home than others. Martyrs and mystics who draw us out of the comfortable middle ground.

This does not mean trying to force ourselves into a false emotionalism, only valuing our faith for its spiritual highs; nor to obstinately setting our face against the world and condemning all around us with the sort of arrogance that draws persecution wherever it goes. However, it does ask of us an openness – neither the heights of intimacy and love, nor the depths of suffering should be alien to our faith and inner spiritual life.

So this morning, let us not be like Mr Hunt or our new Prime Minister, Mr Johnson, at least in their public comments on their faith. Let us heed our readings and be open to a deeper intimacy with God, a union with Christ that is born of contemplation, courage and compassion. Let us follow Jesus wherever he leads, knowing that whatever ordeals we might face, we are not alone but held in the heart of his love.