

*Covid
Reflections*

Jessica Martin

ELY CATHEDRAL 2020

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Because of the coronavirus, Ely Cathedral was forced to lock its doors between 18th March and 3rd July 2020. It was the first time in more than three hundred and fifty years that the cathedral had been closed to worshippers. During this strange season of isolation and anxiety, Canon Jessica Martin wrote a regular series of reflections for the cathedral website – first daily and then, as lockdown went on and on, spaced further apart. Gradually they reached beyond the Ely congregation, until they were being read as a source of comfort and spiritual inspiration as far away as Australia and Texas. ‘You spoke our thoughts,’ was one appreciative comment.

Following many requests, this is the complete series of the reflections gathered into one place.

18 March 2020

I was going to have a stupidly busy Wednesday. Diary stuffed to the gills as usual, event in the evening. All gone. I wandered into the Cathedral – usually full of visitors, buzzing with different agendas and different groups. Today, deserted, except for a single figure removing the chairs.

But the candle stands are alight with somebody's prayers. My inbox is full of messages from our wider Cathedral community offering help for the isolated, phone support, food parcels, shopping, medication. The sense of a loving community is, if anything, stronger than it was when everyone was preoccupied with all the stuff they had to get through before the end of the day.

Four hundred years ago, a poet was forced to self-isolate. His name was John Donne. He had a high temperature; aches; a cough. Stuck in his room, he wrote, 'As sickness is the greatest misery, so the greatest misery of sickness is solitude, when the infectiousness of the disease deters them who should assist from coming'. He added, 'Even the physician dares scarce come'.

We've been here before. We have masses more

knowledge, technical sophistication, scientific and medical reach than we had in 1620 – and we're using it – but our shared humanity faces the same challenge: how can we be together when we can only keep each other safe by having to be alone?

So. We can pray for each other. At the Cathedral we will be praying for people, and we hope to be able to offer some virtual ways people can ask for prayer. We have set up a community support group on Facebook to co-ordinate different ways of helping each other practically and emotionally. We are finding ways to help people join in worship from home, resources for prayer, activities to do, ways to talk together.

We are still a community. 'No man is an island' wrote John Donne; and he was right. One way of describing the Church is 'the Body of Christ', because we all belong together and are loved by God as a community, not in isolation. We can find ways to be alone – together.

Prayer for today

Lord Jesus Christ,
you taught us to love our neighbour,
and to care for those in need
as if we were caring for you.
In this time of anxiety, give us strength

to comfort the fearful, tend the sick,
and to assure the isolated
of our love, and your love,
for your name's sake.
Amen.

19 March 2020

Today's been full of the practicalities of changing direction. How to communicate with each other without being physically present. How to have meetings without actually meeting. How to make decisions together when we're not together. How to help when we can't go round, offer tea or coffee, hug, touch. How to pray together when we're apart.

That's the one I keep thinking about. As we change our service sheet to communicate with people who aren't in the same worshipping space, as we post prayers for people to say in their houses, I keep thinking – how will *this* feel? Will *this* be useful? What will help people feel properly connected up?

Praying alone is quite a challenge, really. What words to use? What space will feel right? Is this about asking for stuff, or is it a general act of trust, or a state of mind, or what? In church a lot of it is laid on, in a way, with intercessions being made for everybody, and a structure, and people around you so you know you are in a community doing things together – but it's harder in a house, with just you or maybe one or two others.

Like many other people, I've watched the clips of Italians in Naples, Iranians in Tehran, singing with each other across the balconies on lockdown. Prayer is like that. A wise man once called prayer the great 'company of voices'. It's not just a little, lonely thread of your own voice, stuck in the house. It's becoming part of a chorus, singing in a kind of accidental harmony, bringing all the familiar needs common to all human beings together: love, and concern, and fear, and even anger or frustration – sending it all to God, from each house, until it becomes a song which reaches up from house after house, voice after voice after voice, finding words you didn't know you had, reaching towards something beyond the confined self.

So you might want to join with the Sunday streamed service so that our voices can rise together and pray for the all the many needs of our difficult situation. We need each other more than ever now.

Prayer for today

O Holy Spirit,
impart to us thoughts higher than our own thoughts
and prayers better than our own prayers,
and powers beyond our own powers
that we may spend and be spent
in the ways of love and goodness

after the perfect image of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

20 March 2020

I saw my daughter off to school this morning. When she comes back at teatime, she won't know when she'll be going again. 'Goodbye Year 9' she remarked sadly. 'I'll miss you.' But school was already emptying out. Teachers self-isolating or sick, pupils who had travelled back to parents in other countries before the borders closed, others with vulnerable family members being kept at home. 'I'll keep an audio diary', she said. 'It helps with being frightened'.

People ringing and emailing saying, are we really being withheld communion for the foreseeable future? How will we manage? Messages: 'I don't know if it's the virus, but I'm not well, so I'm self-isolating'. A colleague: 'I couldn't get into Aldi for the queues, so we'll have to manage. Perhaps the kids will have home-made bread.' A message from someone over-70, trying to reconcile herself with the confinement ahead: 'I really feel I am keeping Lent – in the wilderness'.

In the wilderness. In the wilderness, a place where we can't read what the landmarks mean. In the wilderness, where we don't know where our next

place of refreshment will be, or what it will look like. In the wilderness, where we've lost control of things we thought we had under our hands – where our food came from, the shape of our children's education, how to earn a living, the rhythm and pattern of our spiritual food, the different things which might happen to our fragile bodies, the kinds of things which make death likely. Routines, certainties, probabilities, rituals and patterns – all the things which make life safe – utterly disrupted.

In the wilderness, where Jesus was sustained by angels. In the wilderness, where water sprang from the dry rock in times of thirst and sustained a whole people. In the wilderness, where we discover the things we really need, because the landscape has emptied out. In the wilderness, when we discover that we are smaller than we thought, and that God is closer than we fear.

The first monks fled to the wilderness to find God's presence amongst the noise. But today the wilderness has come to us. Perhaps the unexpectedness of the landscape may help us to see God in unforeseen ways, and to find the springs of love in surprising places. I can't yet see where, though there are already many small blessings to

give thanks for. But I can trust that it will come.

Prayer for the Day

O blessed Jesu Christ, who didst bid all who carry heavy burdens to come to thee, refresh us with thy presence and thy power. Quiet our understandings and give ease to our hearts, by bringing us close to things infinite and eternal. Open to us the mind of God, that in his light we may see light. And crown the choice of us to be thy servants, by making us springs of joy and strength to all whom we serve.

Evelyn Underhill

21 March 2020

It's being a heavenly day. A sharp wind, but bright with spring. Buds on the quince and apple trees in the garden, and the daffodils blowing.

It's very difficult to match up the reality of what's happening, here and round the world, with these spring days. It feels as if everything's waking up, full of promise; and it's difficult to reconcile that feeling with the urgency of the situation. It's almost dreamlike. How can these things be happening?

According to the email I got from a large seed company, they have an unexpectedly high number of people buying seeds this year – especially vegetable seeds. And I definitely get that. I went outside and looked at the garden, dishevelled from winter storms and neglect, and thought, 'What could we do together as a family as we sit this out: will we plant potatoes and marigolds, tomatoes and beans and sweet peas?'

Each day, for the last three days, I've prayed for half an hour, from noon to 12.30 pm. I'm going to go on doing it, each day, and if you are the praying kind perhaps you might like to as well. The

companionship would really help, even when we can't see each other.

My prayer isn't being a very impressive kind of prayer. Nothing to live up to! It's been pretty undisciplined, a bit random even, darting and scudding all over the place, from intensive care wards in Italy, Iran, to our hospitals here, prayer for particular people in particular situations, prayer for this city and its Cathedral, for people facing economic disaster, for the fearful – prayer blown by the wind of different concerns and anxieties and fears.

But as I go on sitting there, watching the changing colour of the clouds and the weather, I steady down as well. The words settle. The light brightens. And I emerge from my half an hour into the rest of the day just a little more calm and courageous than when I started.

Tomorrow, Mothering Sunday, the Church is asking people to do something very simple. At 7 pm, put a lighted candle in your window. Be the light in the darkness of what's happening. If you aren't a words sort of person – or even if you are – you might want to do that too, as we will be. It says something about our care for each other – like the

waves of applause for medical workers coming from the apartments in Paris, or the singing from balconies in Milan. Like prayer, it joins us in love and to love, while we are alone together.

Prayer for the Day

O Father of lights, with whom there is no variation nor shadow of turning, who abidest steadfast as the stars of heaven: give us grace to rest upon thy eternal changelessness, and in thy faithfulness find peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

22 March 2020: Mothering Sunday

First livestream broadcast this morning: the eucharist in an empty cathedral, with just a camera facing the altar. Another bright day. Everyone careful to keep that 1.5 metres of space between them, and conscious of the extra effort that needs to be made to communicate warmth because of it, the particular importance of a smile.

Saying the responses, and hearing the threads of just two voices speaking where last week there were many voices together, an image came into my head: sparks of light divided by dark spaces, like stars in a sky. Or, maybe, like the candles in the Cathedral's candle stands, separated from one another so no one touches a candle anyone else has touched, lit from the flame of the central candle and streaming their brightness into the air.

The Dean spoke in his sermon of lighting a candle this evening as part of today's Day of Prayer and Action, praying for the world and its desperate needs, connecting us up as a human family, a church family, at a time when we might be unable to see kin or receive the warmth of a hug or the clasp of a hand. Praying for those who die in

isolation, while families break their hearts outside the door in order that the infection should not spread. Praying for the families themselves as they mourn. Praying for those who care for the sick and who find the volume of need growing day by day. Praying for those going hungry in the face of lines and lines of empty supermarket shelves.

Years ago, I took a night journey on the train through the north of Sweden just before new year. Over and over, in the dark, I saw candles in the windows of isolated houses, even of warehouse and factories. Nothing else was visible in the wintry dark but the lit windows. In settlements and towns, the candles made a pattern in the night which spoke of hope and comfort, warmth and connectedness, in a world otherwise whirling with snow.

Light a candle this evening for everyone who is struggling alone. Put it, lit, into the window at 7 pm as a sign that you care for the world's sick and isolated. Let your brightness stream into the air and speak up for our connectedness in the love of God, in our care for each other. The lights in the different windows will not be isolated dots. They will make a pattern together which will spell us into the living networks of love.

Prayer for the Day

Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you,
You are gentle with us as a mother with her children.

*Gather your little ones to you, O God,
As a hen gathers her brood to protect them.*

Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness,
Through your gentleness we find comfort in fear.

*Gather your little ones to you, O God,
As a hen gathers her brood to protect them.*

Your warmth gives life to the dead.

Your touch makes sinners righteous.

*Gather your little ones to you, O God,
As a hen gathers her brood to protect them.*

Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us,
In your love and tenderness remake us.

*Gather your little ones to you, O God,
As a hen gathers her brood to protect them.*

(From a prayer of St Anselm)

23 March 2020

For years, I've been a busy person. Even at school, I was the one juggling doing a million different things – orchestras, choirs, even playing in a youth big band, not to mention schoolwork – with a contrasting but equally busy social life.

And the busy-ness hasn't stopped – yet. This morning has if anything been crazier, with the frustrating combination of a number of different online platforms crashing for different members of the family at the same time, which I suppose is what happens when the nation tries to start work remotely at 9 am and the systems can't cope.

But there's a question hovering on the other side of the busy-ness which is getting louder. Because all the things I did every day, I can't do, and although I'm doing other things at the moment, some of them will also go soon. Pretty soon the priesthood – the cure of souls – will come down starkly to two things: prayer and care.

So the question that's getting louder is: what am I *for*?

If you lead a busy life, you almost don't have to ask that really important question about being human, you can just point to your workload and leave it at that. But when it goes away, what then? What am I for? What are *people* for? Do we have to be useful to be valuable?

The Christian faith says, it's not about being useful. It's about being a creature, being part of God's creation, made and loved by the maker of all. We don't earn that by being busy – we already have it. We are commanded to do two things: to love God, and to love our neighbour. But even they aren't the justification for our existence. We don't have to have one. We are loved by God because, out of the pure joy of creating in the divine image, God brought something out of nothing – and so here we are. All the rest is basically flannel.

So if, like me, you are feeling a bit useless, remember that usefulness isn't everything. We have value because we are loved by God. We can offer each other the nourishments of love, and we can help where we can because we are all joined up together. But if all you can do right now is sit this thing out and pray for the world, for the people you love, and for those who are working flat out to save lives, then you are doing the best, and –

paradoxically – the most useful thing you possibly can.

Prayer for the Day

Gracious God,
give skill, sympathy and resilience
to all who are caring for the sick
and your wisdom to those searching for a cure.
Strengthen them with your Spirit,
that through their work many may be restored to health;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

24 March 2020

Over this week, my world – along with everyone else's – has got smaller and smaller.

Now it is the size of the house and garden. At noon I sit downstairs looking out on to the lawn: the Cathedral's south side faces me calmly, reassuringly massive, and I pray from there.

I feel extremely adrift. I can't settle to anything at all – I'm just sitting worrying about stuff. All the basically theatrical structures of formal public prayer in company have fallen away, leaving me exposed to my own internal disarray.

I was noticing this even last week when the formal prayers, prayed aloud, sounded oddly empty, directionless, without people there to hear, falling through the air and landing...where? Yet at the same time as the human theatre of prayer began to weaken and my confidence to fail, so the balance shifted away from the praying self and towards the immensity of God's being. Just being there. No commands or exhortations or anything like that, but an attentive, listening space more massive and concentrated than any attention I could bring to it.

The very sense of space and majesty which Cathedral walls and vaults attempt and imitate, came without warning into the ruinous scurry of my thinking.

Sitting at home, I watch a wood pigeon waddling round the apple tree, the iridescence on its neck bright against the grass, pecking up dinner. The buds on the apple tree are bigger than yesterday. I can't even concentrate on the bigness of God, and turn for comfort to the anemones in disorderly bloom in last year's flowerpots.

When John Donne was in isolation, he played about with the idea of each human being as a 'little world'. He noticed that the mind can range impossibly widely, however confined the body. 'Except God', he wrote, 'Man is a diminutive to nothing.' He juggled that thought for ages, enjoying its grandeur. Then he put it down with a sigh. 'Call back thy Meditation again and bring it down.' We are small, and our thoughts are small too.

But it feels all right to be small. More than all right. It's all right not to know what to say. Uncertainty and disarray are truthful responses to what is happening in the world. Prayer isn't in order to make things happen. Prayer is a turning to the

great heart of the God of love – both bigger, and more particular, than we can imagine.

Prayer for the Day

O God, who art present to thy people in every place, mercifully hear our prayers for those we love who are now parted from us. Watch over them, we beseech thee, and protect them from anxiety and danger; and assure both them and us that thou art always near, and that we are one in thee for ever; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Brooke Foss Westcott

25 March 2020: Feast of the Annunciation

I've always been a bit sniffy about online stuff. Why gaze at a flat screen rather than living in the real, breathing world? The important thing about Church, I'd say, has always been the way everyone is *really there*, at the same time, doing things together, patiently living through real time to make worship.

At least, until all that went away.

Today the Dean posted the communion he celebrated for the Annunciation (the message of the angel to Mary of the birth of Jesus), filmed with a little phone camera in his study, once the chancel of the monastic Infirmary Chapel. I started to type 'and I watched it', but it wasn't like that. It wasn't just watching.

I wasn't there, but I wasn't *not* there, either. I saw it hours after he celebrated the service – the light streaming through the film is the light of early morning and the birds are singing, and I was probably still having my one outing walking the dog and watching the swans rise from the river – so when I said the responses and prayed to receive the

blessing of communion, I was completely out of sync. But that wasn't important. The flat screen brought a living blessing and I can still feel it. It was a message from another world, and it was completely present in this one at the same time.

So: was I there at communion today, or not? I've been puzzling about this question. If your time is different and your place is different, what brings you into communion? The traditional description of a sacrament – an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace – really helps with thinking about that. The film was a kind of lifeline thrown across time and space to join those parted by necessity, and the communion itself a sign of the presence of God for whom time and space are... well, some stuff he made once, not powers to which he is subject.

When our worshipping lives have contracted to so little, it's astonishing and wonderful to find that little turning to so very, very much. I wonder whether I would have been given so great a gift if I had had the luxury of being there in person, of receiving the physical bread and wine? Perhaps I would not have noticed the abundance of what I was being offered.

Perhaps it took a messenger from another time,
another place, to help me notice what was in front
of me all the time.

Prayer for the Day

Verse: Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed
art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb
Jesus.

Response: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now
and at the hour of our death.

26 March 2020

As a nicely trained Christian, I'm very used to the idea that people in communities are part of each other – that no one exists in isolation and that everyone needs everyone else. But I had that idea as a kind of optional extra, if you like – as a part of my faith rather than as a simple, uncompromising description of how life is.

And we lived... last week... in a society where people behaved as if the good things of life happened as if by magic, lulled by rhetoric about 'individual choice' and 'because you're worth it' and 'what you owe to yourself' and stuff like that.

So it was easy to miss the obvious: that human beings can't function at all as single individuals – that we need each other for the most basic things to happen at all. Waste collection. Food production and distribution. Transport. Employment. Schooling. Caring for children. Healthcare.

The images of empty city squares and closed shops and restaurants around the world seem to echo the loneliness we didn't know we had until our systems came under strain. We've learnt in the

most direct possible way that the suffering of others hurts us, that we depend on each other for our wellbeing.

Many people have responded with longings to help – all the local and national volunteers, all the acts of kindness house by house and street by street. The little things we do for each other are *big*. Love really does make the world go round. A few prominent business people – I won't name them – are astonished that suddenly health-risky, hard-nosed business practice is frowned on, that their power is smaller than they assumed. The things we thought were big turn out to be quite small, after all.

Those striking signs from NHS teams saying 'Support the NHS. Stay at home.' It feels absolutely weird that the best thing we can do is nothing, while others – our doctors and nurses and healthcare staff, those responsible for providing people with food and essentials – work round the clock. But being interdependent means sometimes it's not what you do, but how you harmonise with what has to happen. And that's very, very hard.

This evening, at 8pm, the world will clap and cheer doctors and nurses. Because it's all we can do. Because we are dependent on each other. Because

only in community can we flourish.

Prayer for the Day

Enable us, O heavenly Father, to walk with thee this day and every day in sure and simple trust; ever remembering that our little things are all big to thy love, and our big things are all small to thy power; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

27 March 2020

It seems as if the birds have got very loud. Partly, of course, it's that humans have got quieter. The birds aren't competing with traffic noise or the clamour of a normal day. And it *is* spring, time for mating and nesting.

All the same, as we stay in our houses other creatures seem to be finding a new confidence in the outdoor spaces. When it was my turn for daily exercise down by the water meadows, trying to choose a time others wouldn't choose, I had the rare experience of being alone by the wading-bird sanctuary, and the raucous honking, piping, squabbling and chatting of the bird population congregating behind the hedge made me almost laugh out loud. The space was truly theirs, and they were making the absolute most of it.

Later on, in the garden, trying to pray (with mixed results) – the piercing cadence of a calling wren, liquid blackbird song, rooks dislodging each other forcibly from chimney pots, and any number of clumsily amorous wood pigeons. Seagulls mewing like cats, swooping in formation over the East end of the Cathedral. Perhaps it was going on all along

and I just never noticed?

Like everyone, I'm trying to find a new normal. Do I find it in frenetic activity, trying to make sure everyone is as safe and cared for as possible within these new stringent limits? Do I slump, defeated, reading our dark global and national news, brought to a blind standstill by fear? What will keep me steady and calm? Is it betrayal to be delighted by the sight of a couple of bright little birds in the apple tree?

This will be a long haul, and these are hard times. Refusing the blessings which come along the way is as daft as refusing food on a long hike. We can't rush towards a future we don't know – or refuse it either. 'Today's troubles are enough for today,' Jesus tells us. 'Do not worry... your father in heaven cares for you. Are you not of more value than many sparrows?'

I never noticed properly before how valuable a sparrow was. But today, the birds seem jewelled, joyful, bright streaks of energy, lightening the heart and easing the spirit. They come like gifts; but the astonishing thing about them is that, actually, they were always there. I just wasn't paying attention before.

Prayer for the Day

O Lord God, who calls thy servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown: Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing whither we go, but only that thy hand is leading us, and thy love supporting us; to the glory of thy name.
Amen.

28 March 2020

Today's prayer was said by a man at the point of death. He was Thomas Cromwell, who spoke these words as part of the prayer he made before his execution in 1540 at the order of Henry VIII, a ruler whom he had served faithfully for many years.

Cromwell was a man of principle but not a holy man. He was a practical politician in a subtle but brutal court, with everything that that means. He had a good deal of blood on his hands. Yet, at his end, he committed everything he was – good, bad and indifferent – to God's care, 'sure that the thing cannot perish which is committed unto thy mercy'.

Nothing has ever seemed so perishable to me as it does at the moment. I fear for so many people, alongside a buried but perfectly real fear for myself. When life seems so unpredictably fragile, it sometimes feels as if every certainty is being swept away.

Yet this prayer, made in extremity by someone in very great need of mercy, says otherwise. It says that everything, and everyone, we give into God's hands, is still held there, imperishable, unfading,

alive and growing in God's mercy. At the end of the great psalm of death, Psalm 90, the psalmist writes: 'prosper the works of our hands; O Lord, prosper our handiwork.' Nothing disappears out of view; nobody is forgotten; no person is swept away for ever. The thing cannot perish which is committed to God's mercy.

When we pray, that is what we do: we commit to God's mercy things and situations and people, knowing that in God's hands they are preserved and kept and protected, that all that is loved cannot perish in God's sight. We can't see what that means, any more than Cromwell knew what exactly he was asking for, or precisely how his life and its rather murky doings would be part of the eternal love. But he prayed just the same.

And, when we can't do anything else in these dark times, so can we.

Prayer for the Day

O Lord Jesu, who art the only health of all men living, and the everlasting life of those who die in thy faith: I give myself wholly unto thy will, being sure that the thing cannot perish which is committed unto thy mercy.

Thomas Cromwell (1484-1540)

29 March 2020: Fifth Sunday of Lent

This day's reflection was also the cathedral's Sunday sermon

Jesus began to weep. John 11.35

It all happens at a strange, dark, anxious time. When Lazarus falls ill, Jesus, the visionary friend of the family, the famous healer – is not there. Lazarus's sisters send a message imploring Jesus's help: 'He whom you love is ill'. Jesus responds confidently to their troubled message, but his words seem difficult and obscure. He doesn't set out towards them.

In fact, it's not safe for Jesus to go to the sick man and his family. It's a journey which might end in his own death. Bethany is pretty close to Jerusalem, where the authorities are threatening to kill Jesus by stoning. When he finally decides to make the journey – at a point where he also seems to be saying that he will arrive too late - his companions are horrified, dismayed and fearful.

Jesus does arrive too late. He comes into a great wave of grief. The house is full of mourners, many

of them from Jerusalem, the city in which powerful men are planning Jesus's own death. Both of Lazarus's sisters, Martha and Mary, say the same thing to Jesus: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'

As the living man Jesus contemplates the dead man Lazarus, he stands between life and death himself. There is a long ordeal ahead of him. It will end in his isolated exile from human love and care, in a lonely death from asphyxiation in a public place. Those who love him will stand helpless at a distance, watching, because watching is all that they can do.

Lazarus's sisters don't know any of this. They are consumed by their own grief for their brother's death. But, even now, their reproaches are coloured by a spring of irrational hope: 'Even now', says Martha, 'I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus hears what she says, and says to her that he, himself, this fragile, breakable man in front of her, a man in deadly danger, is also the endless and continual life of God.

And she believes him.

When Jesus encounters the passionate grief of his dead friend's family, his composure seems to desert

him. 'He was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.' He asks to see the tomb. 'Come and see,' they say to him, echoing the words of invitation he gave to his first disciples at the beginning of all this, words of hospitality about a living house which have now become an invitation to a graveside. Lazarus is buried in a cave, with a stone lying against it, and as he comes towards it Jesus knows that he sees an echo of his own grave, a precursor of his own coming death.

And he weeps. He weeps for Lazarus, whom he loved and who died when he was far away. He weeps for himself, and for the goodness of life which he must leave, for the connections of love which will fall away, for the promise and hospitality of his first transforming encounters, shadowed now by the pain and isolation which lie in front of him. He weeps for and with the griefs of the human family for whom he will die, for every isolated death, every grieving sister and brother and mother. The lonely sorrow of every human being begins to fall upon the Son of God at the grave of his friend.

But he does not look away, and he does not falter. Love needs to be unflinching. Faced with the great rock doorway which separates the living from the dead he says, 'Roll away the stone.' And from the

place of death, real, actual death, with all the tragedy and sorrow which must attend it, the living man Lazarus will respond to God's words of love and stumble blindly towards light and safety.

Because Jesus will die, Lazarus, who died, will live. There will be another tomb, and another great rock doorway between the living who grieve and the body's resting place, and it will be rolled away by angels to reveal a space as clear and as empty as the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem's Temple. The living, loving person will be somewhere else entirely.

Because the story of Jesus's encounter with Lazarus is not a story of rescue, but of what happens beyond rescue; not a story of healing but of impending sacrifice; not a story of triumph, but of patience. Looking ahead to his own suffering, Jesus shows us the one important thing about the grief of God, and it is this: that love is stronger than death.

Here, and now, in the face of all the danger the human family is in, that is our grieving God's promise.

Love is stronger than death. Because of love, in the end, all the tombs will be empty.

Prayer for the Day

Most merciful God,

who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ
delivered and saved the world:

Grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

30 March 2020

I ironed the school shirts over the weekend. Even as I was doing it, I laughed a bit at myself – we won't need those shirts for many weeks, probably months. But the routine of it was so reassuring, the sight of them hanging in the cupboard so comforting, that I did it anyway.

I really treasure daily routine. It calms the mind. Whether it's household stuff – the rhythm of meals, washing up, laundry – or daily prayer by videolink, or the new patterns of silent prayer during these extraordinary times, these things seem to make bridges of safety across the turbulent depths of uncertainty and apprehension. My colleague Jenny talked in her daily post about these days being like walking on ground which opens up in great gaping holes. I absolutely recognise that feeling. But the daily kindnesses and connections, all the different ways of 'taking care' and making order, feel like strong narrow bridges joining up past and present so that I don't slip down any dreamlike rabbit holes or feel quite so disoriented about who I am and what I should be doing.

As Holy Week approaches, I notice just how

domestic, how ordinary and habitual Jesus is in the signs he gives us of our communion. Breaking and blessing bread as part of the daily meal. The ordinary hospitality of washing feet. Praying and singing together in the evening. This is the stuff of daily life which he fills with the light of God's presence.

We can't share the loaves we bless and break, but we can give thanks for them as we remember that we are bound together in our shared humanity. We can find ingenious new ways to care for each other in the sight of God. Physical touch has become rare in this strange world in which we find ourselves, but other forms of connection, in speech and sight, have become extremely precious. Prayer – alone, by videolink, by the deep shared patterns of liturgy – rests the scurrying mind as nothing else. Habits can sustain us, and routine is a blessing in bewilderment.

Our patterns of duty are blessed by God's presence through Jesus, who knew how important habit, routine and household rituals were for people, and who hallowed them in his own practice. Every time you say grace alone, he sits across the table from you and speaks the Amen to your blessing; and every time you pray for those absent, his

intercession reaches across the wide gulf of the heavens to the heart of God.'

Prayer for the Day

Be present, Spirit of God, within us, your dwelling place and home, that this house may be one where all darkness is penetrated by your light, all troubles calmed by your peace, all evil redeemed by your love, all pain transformed in your suffering, and all dying glorified in your risen life. Amen.

Jim Cotter

31 March 2020

It's the poet John Donne's day today: he died on March 31st in the year 1631. Donne once said of God that 'all occasions invite his mercies, and all times are his seasons' – and that's true even of this strange spring, when just as the world wakes up and fills with new life, so human beings struggle with the acute and worldwide danger of a new disease.

Donne wouldn't have found that so strange as we do, because he lived in a time when few diseases had cures and where infection was common. So he knew what it was like to live not only with danger, but with the total unpredictability of life which went with that. I am nothing like so used as he would have been to the sudden reverses of a world full of uncontrollable and possibly fatal upheavals, and I haven't adjusted yet. Perhaps no one ever does, or can.

Donne worried a lot about his own changeableness, about how unpredictable his mind and his emotions were, about the fluctuations in his faith, in his confidence in God and in his own commitment to serve him.

But he was not tempted to see *God* as changeable. Quite the reverse. For Donne, God was the steady strength which underpinned a fast-changing and fragile world, always inviting his bewildered and flawed creatures to lean upon his endless lovingkindness, however long it took them to realise they needed it.

This is what Donne says about leaning on God in difficult times: 'We ask... our daily bread, and God never says you should have come yesterday; he never says you must come again tomorrow, but *today if you will hear his voice*, today he will hear you... he can bring thy Summer out of Winter, though thou have no Spring.'

And, for those of us for whom this spring there is nothing to do but wait, those words are a strength and stay. They let us know that leaning upon our changeless God is the only and the best thing we can do in this our suddenly unpredictable world. We will receive the nourishment we need for today, and that will be enough.

Prayer for the Day

O Lord, never suffer us to think that we can stand by ourselves, and not need thee.

John Donne

1 April 2020

The scale of what's happening in the world is too big to take in. I just wrote, 'the outside world' – and of course it is the 'outside' world because I am mostly 'inside', just like everyone else. But just because it's 'outside' doesn't mean I'm not part of it.

Yet my world has contracted so much. Will the milk supply last until our next shop? How long can we delay going to the supermarket? What could I use as pea sticks, will the twigs lying about all over the garden work just as well – or not? Is there a good use for that leftover potato? These are small triumphs, very intense in their feeling. I direct real energy towards decisions which I would barely have thought about in our busy former life.

Apart from the daily walk – first lot of ducklings, black fluffballs following their mother in the wetlands, swans preparing to nest near the bridge, steely unruffled river-water – I see the world almost entirely through the medium of a screen, either video-conferencing colleagues and friends or just watching stuff, films or the news. Watching *Casablanca* with the family, I find myself thinking

'those crowds are much too close together!' The real and the unreal mix on my screen every day, and it's confusing.

'My brother says to me on the phone, 'It seems a pretty weird response to a crisis to go back indoors and watch some more daytime TV.' He's quite right. When you know dreadful things are happening in the world, you want to help. You don't want to go home and count the potatoes. But that's what we must do.

All this makes it very difficult to pray for the 'outside' world. It's easier to pray for individuals, but how to pray for this crisis engulfing so very many people?

I am comforted by St Paul's words. He says 'The Spirit helps us to pray in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.' (Romans 8.26)

So: when I can't find the words, or feel overwhelmed by the sheer scale of what's happening, I remember that I don't have to understand or find the right things to say or feel. What we cannot find words for is caught up by the Spirit who feels what it overwhelms us to feel, and

pleads with eloquence we are too small to possess.
We only have to keep trying – and that is quite
enough for now.

Prayer for the Day

Father, I am seeking; I am hesitant and uncertain, but will
you, O God, watch over every step of mine and guide me.

St Augustine of Hippo

2 April 2020

I've talked a lot about prayer. Not just because prayer is a source and spring of the Christian life – though it is – but because prayer joins us when we are physically parted.

Christian community is – usually – so strongly built on bodily closeness. In ordinary times we gather together, we share the peace by taking each other's hands, we receive the sacrament together, breaking bread, sharing a common cup. We rely, too, on the strong symbolic and gathering power of the church building in our civic landscapes, an open space for anyone and everyone.

Without those physical encounters, without those holy spaces, prayer becomes our main loadbearing connection. And – like every kind of deprivation – this bodily abstinence reveals blessings not visible before. The holiness of domestic spaces. The importance of keeping 'in touch' when we cannot touch. The warmth and timbre of the human voice.

But it has made me ask myself with more urgency what prayer is. What am I doing when I pray? Because – just occasionally – you can hear people

talking about prayer as if it might be a kind of *strategy*.

And I don't think it is. Jesus prayed constantly, but he did not expect prayer automatically to spare him pain, or sorrow, or even death itself. In this week of all weeks, as we approach the Passion of Jesus, in which he turned faithfully towards agony, we can't see prayer as a disaster-averting piece of automatic magic.

So why pray? What would it *achieve* for us to pray, alone together?

Perhaps – in 'achievement' terms – nothing. But to pray is to turn towards God. That's all (and everything). Towards the source of all life and health and peace. Towards the heart of all love. To be filled with love may bring joy, but does not guarantee happiness; to embrace God's life is to turn towards a kind of death; to behave as a creature is to remember what we cannot, in our own little strength, do or be.

But prayer gives its own gifts. In bringing us close to our God, we are lent a strength not our own; a love we cannot feel by ourselves; a peace which can't be shredded by fear. Prayer holds before God

people and situations beyond us in every way, so that even in parting we can commend our loves into the very heart of all love, and know them held, and never abandoned.

Prayer for the Day

O Thou, from whom to be turned is to fall, to whom to be turned is to rise, and in whom to stand is to abide for ever; grant us in all our duties thy help, in all our perplexities thy guidance, in all our dangers thy protection, and in all our sorrows thy peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

St Augustine of Hippo

3 April 2020

I've lost my powers of concentration. Spending so many hours in front of a screen for so many different purposes, my mind has gone into a continual jitter. I skitter between the news (an addiction which has fully taken hold and which fuels itself), video meetings, calls with friends and family, correspondence - all happening on screen. I'm like a hamster in a complex cage, checking all its different corners to see what kind of reward, or what kind of danger, has presented itself since I last visited.

It spills out into other things, as I've discovered on attempting a 'day off' today. During my time in the garden I've not settled to one task for more than a few minutes together; am I removing dead leaves from the beds, cleaning up last year's pots, watering, clearing the patio of rogue borage? Or all of the above? Little piles of half-done tasks lie about here and there. Conversations at home have the same distracted, half-focussed aspect; and I seem to be trying to read about five books at once.

Presented with two apparently incompatible truths – a huge unfolding crisis in the world at large, and

the unchanging domesticity of staying at home – some part of me seems to be attempting to treat domestic life as if it is itself a form of crisis.

But it's not all like that. Praying at noon today, I put aside all my lists of people and situations and simply sat still, saying the words of the Jesus prayer. After twenty minutes, the world had slowed enough for me to be able to pay some kind of sustained attention to what was in front of me, and I was blessed by a quieter mind. In the unchanging rituals of making household order some sense of quiet continuity became visible again. And spending a couple of hours without allowing myself near a screen for any purpose whatsoever proved rather calming, too.

'Hangs my helpless soul on thee' wrote Charles Wesley in the hymn, 'Jesu, lover of my soul'. I never knew how much I relied on seeing myself as powerful and effective (regardless of the evidence) until I discovered how little I could actually do.

Yet, at the same time, the discovery of my helplessness gives me a gift I didn't know I needed. That gift is *patience* – a maligned word, sharing its field of meaning with both 'passion' and 'suffering'. For in patience, by grace, I deepen the faith I always

needed, but could not see well enough to desire.

Prayer for the Day

Set free, O God, our souls from all restlessness and anxiety; give us that peace and power which flow from thee; keep us in all perplexities and distresses, in all fears and faithlessness; that so, upheld by thy power, and stayed on the rock of thy faithfulness, we may through storm and stress abide in thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

4 April 2020

Palm Sunday tomorrow, and the beginning of the strangest Holy Week I have known in my lifetime. 'Follow me', said Jesus, walking freely in the world, making relationships – teacher, healer, friend – with men and with women and with great gatherings. But now that there must be no gatherings and we must take no journeys, what can that mean? How do we follow by standing still, each one of us separated from the whole?

In the unfolding story of Jesus's last week, tomorrow will find Jesus surrounded by crowds passionate to give him honour. But it won't stay that way. By Thursday night he will be cut off from companionship, alone in his endurance. On Friday he will be a public spectacle of suffering, struggling for each breath, and those who love him will only be able to watch from a distance.

In usual times, the Church marks the heartbreaking movement of Jesus's body from communion to isolation by gathering. By acclaiming him together with palms as the humble King who rides into the holy city. By sharing in his last meal round the holy table, honouring each other's bodies in the washing of feet, watching in prayer together as the night

deepens, by a solemn communal witness to his dying self.

None of this is available.

But we have one thing we didn't have before. Isolated from each other and from the comforts and sacraments of the Church, Jesus's own isolation becomes clear and present. It is a cross to take up, a vigil to keep. It may even be that as the events of Holy Week cut Jesus off from human solace, so his followers, cut off from each other, draw especially close to his love. That the sorrows of this Holy Week, above all the sorrows of isolation which must keep the sick and the dying cut off from those who love them, are particularly borne in and through the remembrance of our dying Lord upon whom all sorrow fell.

From tomorrow, during Holy Week, these Reflections will follow Jesus in story and image, as he goes into deeper into the dark, and as he will emerge into the light. All over this country, and all over the world, that darkness is terrifyingly present for many, and the light not always easy to see or to believe in. But this is the story of light, of its springing up in darkness; of the love which is stronger than death. As we follow the Lord of love

into the darkness of the coming week, we will entrust ourselves to him, knowing ourselves never so much or so kindly accompanied as when we walk with him alone.

Prayer for the Day

Thanks be to thee, O Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits which thou hast given us, for all the pains and insults which thou hast borne for us. O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother, may we know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly, now and for evermore. Amen.

Richard of Chichester

5 April 2020: Palm Sunday



So many people. Children shin up trees to see better. Others strip the lower branches, improvising with what's to hand. A young lad drops his spray of leaves at the feet of the gentle-eyed animal Jesus rides. The people make themselves sacred heralds for their unheralded King, humble and riding on a donkey. They shout the words of the psalm of holy acclamation: 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; we bless you from the house of the Lord!'

'Link the pilgrims with cords right to the horns of the altar!' cry a little group to one side, linking hands and beckoning. Others shout at them for

blasphemy, and a small scuffle breaks out.

It causes a ripple of worry amongst Jesus's companions.

'What will they expect you to do next?' wonders one of them under cover of the shouting. 'We don't have an army, or even much of a sword.'

'To command peace,' answers Jesus. 'To set free the prisoners of hope.' But he says it sombrely, watching the children leaning over the balconies, the solemn expectancy of the older men in the crowd, watching the families clapping and smiling, banging pots and pans, waving their branches with an expectancy which carries with it just an edge of strain, a fearful pleading. *We need you*, their faces say, *we need you to risk yourself for us, or who knows what might happen to us and to those we love?*

'Is it wise?' asks the disciple. 'Won't it cause trouble?'

'Just for now' replies Jesus, 'they are doing exactly what needs to be done. And as for the risk, I will carry it.'

I will carry it. When the streets empty, and the

families flee home and shut the doors –mothers and fathers, grandparents, great-grandparents, children and babies, young men and women.

When trouble is hard at hand, and the city filled with fear, just one man will bear the burden.

But that's not yet. For now, the children wave palms, and the women hold out their hands, and the people sing the songs of Zion in harmony with heaven, just as they should.

Prayer for the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, who in your tender love towards the human race sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take upon him our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross: grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Scripture quoted or paraphrased in this Reflection:

Matthew 21.1-11, Zechariah 9,9,10, 12, Psalm 118.26-27, Luke 19.28-40 esp 39-40, Psalm 22.11, Psalm 137.3.

6 April 2020: Holy Monday



A handful of days before the Passion, Jesus is a guest at Lazarus's house. The man looking towards death stops for a moment and turns to honour the one recalled to life. There is still time for some gifts before the clouds cover the sun.

The meal is barely started when Mary walks into it carrying a jar. When she pulls out the stopper the room fills with the smell of wet soil and flowers, the smell of spring. She pours the oil, extravagantly, clumsily, over Jesus's feet. The oil flows across her fingers and onto the floor in slow rivulets. She pulls her hair free of its scarf, lets it down its own shining river into the flow, sheen to sheen, rubs the wet

hank of it against his feet. She concentrates on the task, like a woman kneeling by the river to wash the laundry, or the pots from dinner, resolutely domestic at her extraordinary duty.

The other figure sits still, flat as a painted image. Mary's hand and hair glint with wet. The light of the lamp catches the slack shimmer of the oil.

Judas gazes at the woman with a kind of hunger. It doesn't look like lust; it's closer to envy. He tells her she is wasteful; extravagant with God's good gifts. Anointing is not for every day.

But it's not every day, says Jesus. We anoint the dead, and this is in preparation for my burial. The smell of sunlight and warm earth springing green, the bright rain and the running rivers, the light of morning and the blue of heaven, heartsease in the grass and the silver of the olive leaves: these are the gifts she gives to the one who must leave them all behind.

But, Mary says. The smell...is more like something new.

It's that too, says Jesus. Death and life come together this Passover. God's river overflows with

mercies, and in his light we see light.

He gestures towards the unbroken loaf of bread,
and below his breath speaks the blessing of a dying
King:

*Blessed are you, my Beloved. You are like the light of the
morning, when the sun rises, a morning without clouds.
You are like the tender grass springing out of the earth
by clear shining after rain.*

Prayer for the Day

Dear Jesus, help us to spread your fragrance everywhere we go. Flood our souls with your spirit and life. Penetrate and possess our whole being so utterly that our lives may be only a radiance of yours. Shine through us, and be so in us, that every soul we come into contact with may feel your presence in our soul. Let them look up and see no longer us but only Jesus! Stay with us, and then we shall begin to shine as you shine; so to share as to be a light to others; the light, O Jesus, shall be all from you, none of it will be ours; it will be you, shining on others through us. Amen.

Cardinal Newman

Scripture quoted or paraphrased in this Reflection:

John 12.1-11, Isaiah 42.9, Psalm 36.8-9, 2 Samuel 23.2-4.

7 April 2020: Holy Tuesday



The kingly entrance was two days ago. Nothing much has happened. The mass of Jesus's followers looks tiny mixed with the city crowds coming in for the festival. Philip watches unhappily. It is all very well to be homely in Galilee, telling stories you won't explain properly about country stuff – shepherding and housework and crops – but will it do here? When the Greeks approach, two snappy dressers looking for novelty, his heart sinks. 'Sir,' says one – stretching a point, because Philip's not looking all that sophisticated himself – 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.'

The Teacher looks towards them and greets the strangers as if they, not he, were the city's sovereign visitors.

Then he says, 'We have come to the right time.'
Nods at the men. 'The *kairos*.'

They wait. Now he is fumbling with the belt at his waist, where a little empty-looking bag is hanging. He upends it, and something rolls into his palm. Grain, a single piece, still in the husk.

'It doesn't look much', he says. Takes it up between finger and thumb. 'Do you think it could blossom in this dust?'

Baffled silence.

'We will have to take the risk,' says Jesus. He flicks the embedded grain at the ground. Spits like a peasant, straight onto it. A good shot. He nods at them again, village-prophet style. 'That's your sign.'

The sun has gone in, covered by low masses of cloud.

The Lord says softly, *'The whole world is heavy with*

his weight.' (But he finishes up with the Greek word, *doxa*, glory, and he doesn't sound so homely after all.) He kneels for a moment in the dust, forehead to the ground; then, with a small effort, stands to face them. 'Life,' he says, 'is hidden in the single grain. You can try to keep it, safe in the pouch, but it's nothing alone. It traps the life until the life itself dies. But – fling it away from you on to the ground. Give it away into the needs of a situation. The life breaks it, but then the shoot climbs; it unfolds until it is standing high enough to nourish hundreds more lives. The grain is split, but the plant is a gift to the world.'

He looks round at the circle of faces.

'It's a piece of foolishness I don't fancy,' he says. 'No one *wants* to be thrown away. I don't. But there's no more time to be wise in. No more time to eat and talk and belong. Crowds and families, meals and work. We walked together for the whole day in the marvellous light, but now it's almost dark, when we cannot see each other for the shadows.'

And as he says it, it is dark. A long, low rumble of thunder. There is going to be a storm. A drop bounces; then another. God is speaking after all,

and the world shivers. The rain rises to a drumming and the Lord is hard to hear.

'Not...now,' he is saying. 'Listen! But things... changed... lost for good... the lawless – when the life splits the grain – ...anyone... find me. Greek and Jew... and free, child and.... Everyone. You'll remember? Life... in the grain and the water.'

Philip says, 'I'll remember.'

Jesus walks away from the crowd. For the first time that anyone can remember, nobody follows him.

Prayer for the Day

V. We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you:

R. **By your holy cross you have redeemed the world.**

V. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

R. **We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.**

V. We preach Christ crucified, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

R. **By your holy cross you have redeemed the world**

V. God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

R. **We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you; by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.**

Scripture quoted or paraphrased in this Reflection:

John 12.20-36, Isaiah 6.3,1 Corinthians 1.18-31, Galatians 3.28

8 April 2020: Holy Wednesday



‘We don’t need servitude,’ says Judas to the Teacher. ‘We need power! You’ve got it and you don’t use it! And because *you* don’t *we* can’t. You behave like a, like a servant! A slave! You’re not just setting up to get yourself killed – like a slave – you will get us killed too. Like slaves. You could do so much! You don’t think strategically! You don’t think at all!’ He is shouting now, and pacing.

After a silence he says, more quietly, ‘You can’t sort out the poor one at a time.’

‘No,’ Jesus agrees. ‘The poor you have always with you.’

‘You said. But actually, if you were prepared to *do* something, you might find you were wrong.’

Judas has got his self-possession back by this time. He shifts to the singsong chant of scripture, and intones, half-jeering: *'Blessed are those who consider the poor and needy; the Lord will deliver them in the time of trouble.'*

'Go on,' says Jesus.

'The Lord preserves them and restores their life, that they may be happy in the land; he will not hand them over to the will of their enemies.'

'Well,' Jesus says, 'it depends what you think poverty is.' He lifts his hand, quoting too. *'And so I said, Lord, be merciful to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you.'*

Judas shrugs, turning his shoulder against the Teacher's look.

'For goodness' sake!' says Peter, who likes things direct. 'What are you both talking about, please?'

'I expect he'll show you', says Judas.

'I can't show you what you won't see,' says Jesus. He takes a morsel of bread and speaks the blessing with unusual formality. 'Blessed be God, always

and ever present with us, in the farthest heaven, in the uttermost parts of the sea, in the grave itself, in his profound and mysterious counsels, in life and in death, in the acts of the wicked and the acts of the good, bless the Lord, bless the Lord, always and ever bless the Lord.'

He dips it in the sauce, and holds it out to Judas. 'Be quick', he says. Judas, chewing, turns to leave, taking his purse. The slam echoes against the opposite wall in the darkening street.

'Shall I fetch the lamp?' asks Peter.

'Not now', says Jesus. 'It's night.'

Prayer for the Day

O God, whose blessed Son endured the loneliness and darkness of the cross, that we might enjoy eternal intimacy with thee; Grant that amid life's shadows we may know that we are never forsaken, but that we are ever walking in the light of thy countenance; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture quoted or paraphrased in this Reflection:

John 13.21-32, Psalm 70, Psalm 139.4-11

9 April 2020: Maundy Thursday



He said, 'Remember.'

So we do as he asked, now that he is gone from the world of touch and sight, imagining his vanished hands and the face of love, now that the world's wind no longer breathes through his lungs, now that the air-laden blood does not nourish his heart. In mourning, in bewilderment, we listen to the memory of his words.

He said, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'

He said, 'The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his home, and you will leave me alone.'

We said, surely we would go on following him however dark or dangerous the future looked, and he said we

might not be strong enough even to try. He said that we would choose to cut ourselves off. We did not want to believe that, but we did it all the same.

In the light of the dying afternoon, the Teacher kneels like a slave, cupping Peter's dusty ankle in his palm. The road-grit rubs between skin and skin, warm with shared life. Peter says, you shouldn't be doing that. The Teacher says that nothing is more important than the services of love. Remember that, and love one another.

The bread he breaks apart comes as a gift to each separate palm, a scattering of crumbs to a great forest of outstretched hands; he touches each one. As the bread fragments, we draw together.

He says that he is a Body breaking to make us whole.

He says we are learning love through absence, apartness.

He says that remembering will bring him closer than the food in our mouths or the wine that warms the heart with each swallow.

He says that even when he is alone, he is not alone. The Father is always there. He says that anguish is

at the door this night, but joy will come in the morning.

He says: in the end, there will be nothing left to ask for. We will have everything we need.

He says, 'Remember.'

Prayer for the Day

The wisdom of God that keeps back the seas, now pours water into a basin; and the Master washes the feet of his servants.

He who wraps the heaven in clouds girds himself with a towel, and he in whose hands is the life of all things kneels down to wash the feet of his servants.

Holy Thursday, Mattins, Orthodox

Scripture quoted or paraphrased in this Reflection:

John 16.16, 20, 31-33, John 13.1-17, 31b-end; 1 Corinthians 11.23-26; John 6.1-15, Psalm 30.5

10 April 2020: Good Friday



The killing begins with a touch. Judas's cloak swaddles Jesus's body; his mouth upturns to kiss the Teacher's lips: tender, intimate, carrying a betrayal that will crack the heart, fill the lungs with blood and water. It's a parody of all the loves of humankind: parent to child, lover to lover. It looks protective, companionate. It looks like the beginning of something. 'Oh,' says Jesus, startled as well as unsurprised, '*Oh, my own familiar friend.*' The last tenderness his feeling body will receive heralds and invites all the other violations.

It's chaotic, the machinery for his judicial murder; but it works. He is being *processed*. Human power does everything it can to implicate him in its logic, but he will not consent. Silence – neither a weapon nor a protection – is his only integrity in the long route towards breaking. The flogging, the mockery,

the shoving from place to place, the clothing and stripping, the broken skin and bleeding head, the incidental jibes – all repurpose him as the helpless repository for the weight and force of all those unacknowledged desperate passions: fury and disappointment and shame, disgust and malice, lust and fear, humiliation and outrage, sorrow and grief and even pain.

He carries them all, so that all can receive mercy.

The darkening world contracts to the effort of this breath, and this. And this. This. This. He accompanies every dying soul, but travels absolutely alone.

God does not speak. Angels do not sustain him. He is being broken by the passing of time.

Those who love him watch from a distance, held in the world of the living and parted from him by the great stone – a stone he labours to lift with every breath – which walls the dying away from their earthly comfort. He thinks, in a distant, fluttering way, about home, and tells a kind face to take his mother there.

The man who carries mercy receives none. Still he labours to lift the great stone his fragile heart has

become. He is beyond praying that it might break, but the prayer he cannot make – *Eli, Eli* – is met at last in the longed-for long exhale that brings everything to a stop.

The world has broken its Maker, and the sun is dark.

Prayer for the Day

Almighty Father, look with mercy upon this your family, for which our Lord Jesus Christ was content to be betrayed and given up into the hands of sinners and to suffer death upon the cross; who is alive and glorified with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Scripture quoted, paraphrased or alluded to in this Reflection: Psalm 55.13-16; Isaiah 53.4-6; Matthew 26.44-50; Matthew 27.3-5; Matthew 27.27-end; Psalm 22.1-11; Psalm 88; John 18.1-end of 19.

11 April 2020: Easter Eve



We stayed as long as we were allowed, came as close as we were allowed. We sat until nightfall on the other side of the great closed entrance which walled away the living from the dead. We could do him no more harm and no more good; if he was beyond our love, at least he was also beyond his suffering.

Eventually the authorities called in the holy curfew and sent us to our homes; so we went, blank and empty, confined in our domestic spaces, apart from each other, dry-eyed, walled away even from the mercy of tears.

We would have sat there all night if we had been allowed, kept vigil to and beyond the dawn, imagining the rigid chill of the hand we could not hold. We tried to reconstruct the continual change of living expression on the grey half-recognisable

face; we saw the still ribcage under which nothing fluttered to mark the passing of time.

Imprisoned by time ourselves, we could not visualise him in eternity; but he began to pull free of the horrors of yesterday. We held him swaddled, sleeping; recalled to life the bright-eyed toddler; the tall straightness of his growing, like a young plant; the steady hands of his maturity touching another's head, or blessing and breaking bread, or pouring away the grime and detritus from his followers' feet. Confined and helpless, we imagined our tender, futile, superfluous acts of love and prayed for a chance to offer gifts to the body where once he was.

Stuck as we were in kitchens and sleeping-spaces, upon roofs, behind barred doors in the little room up the stairs where we last ate with him, we were not alone. All over the world and down the irresistible currents of passing time, the great company of the grieving sit with us: in car parks and waiting rooms, in gardens and on balconies, in cellars, at the bottom of burning high-rise buildings, on the wrong sides of borders and rivers and seas, on rubbish heaps, outside prisons, at gallows-crossings, waiting for consignments of ashes, for telegrams and emails and texts and postcards, outside the locked places of worship,

listening again and again to the last message on the answerphone, calling in voices which bounce against the stars and fall back again to say: *in the continuing circle of the living, we love you.*

In this empty space, arid-eyed, we keep vigil for the Beloved who lies on the other side of the dry and immoveable rock.

Prayer for the Day

Grant, Lord, that we who are baptised into the death of your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ may continually put to death our evil desires and be buried with him; that through the grave and gate of death we may pass to our joyful resurrection; through his merits, who died and was buried and rose again for us, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture quoted, paraphrased or alluded to in this Reflection:
Matthew 27.59-61; Luke 23.54-55; Psalm 139.6-7; Isaiah 53.2

12 April 2020: Easter Day



There he is. Always just a little ahead of us. He stands a little out of our sight when we weep until it is the right time to be heard and seen. In the early stillness of the wet garden, he waits in the shade of the trees as the sun rises. On the shore, after the dark nights of fruitless grieving, he keeps vigil, preparing to offer the warm fragments of fish and bread to our wet, chilled hands, the voice of homecoming to the starved sorry heart.

There is no sign of the great stone between living and dying in his company. It has been rolled away. The river that runs between the dead and the living is a ford now, though the current is fierce and the water cold.

When we gaze into the dark space of the cave, empty of anything but a few folded cloths, the patient voice of the messenger says, *He is not here.* You are looking in the wrong place. If you go home, you will find him there. *He has gone ahead of you.*

The hem of his robe flutters a little beyond our reaching hands; *don't touch me*, he says, *I'm still between times, visiting for your comfort, still preparing to join the heavens to the earth.*

Yet if we need it, absolutely need it, we can clasp his wounded feet, demand the painful warmth of squeezing his damaged palms, of hiding within the gash in his side. *Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.*

If and when and always as we need it, he sits at the table with us, eating bread, honeycomb, dried fish, drinking and sharing the wine and the pure cool water He dries the great spring of human tears with his sleeve, the fountain which our mourning released.

He goes ahead to that city: the city of lovingkindness, the city without any temple except the shared body of love, with its river which nourishes the peace of all peoples; a place in which

the great sea of salt tears, the ocean of all the world's mourning, is at last changed into an endless tenderness.

Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.

Prayer for the Day

Lord of all life and power, who through the mighty resurrection of your Son overcame the old order of sin and death to make all things new in him: grant that we, being dead to sin and alive to you in Jesus Christ, may reign with him in glory; to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be praise and honour, glory and might, now and in all eternity. Amen.

Scripture quoted, paraphrased or alluded to in this Reflection:

John 20.1-29; Psalm 36.5-9; Psalm 42.1, 9-10; John 21.1-14; Mark 16.1-7; Matthew 28.1-10; Zechariah 12.12.10, 13.1; Revelation 21.1-7, 22-24; Revelation 22.1-5; Luke 24.1-12.

13 April 2020: Easter Monday

I didn't know how focused I was on the journey to Easter Day until I got to the day after Easter Day. Having found ways to be joyful yesterday, I discovered this morning that I had no spiritual plan for the days following it.

We celebrated the great transformation, the great change that is our Lord's resurrection. Yet we wake up into the same troubled world as yesterday.

I wasn't expecting anything else – really. And yet I am also having to re-align, to accept that a resurrection faith is a faith that God's light shines amongst darkness, God's hope amongst trouble. It's about a way of living, not a triumphant ending. For those first disciples, it was the beginning of a new kind of work in a world just as unhappy and lost as ever it had been in the days before Jesus's arrest.

If we were 'in the wilderness' during Lent, where are we now? Have we emerged from it – or not? I suppose one important answer to that lies in the Lord's Prayer itself. We can be confident to receive 'daily bread' – everything we need for each day to stay hopeful and steadfast. There are always

blessings to notice at any given moment, sustenance for dry or sorrowful times. And there is an awful lot in these times to be sorrowful about.

At the same time, we are called to look up and out, beyond our immediate wants and lacks, to our prayers for the needs of the wider world, remembering all the many different ways we are dependent upon one another for our common wellbeing.

Some days are definitely easier than others for this work! But even when a little daunted, the image of our risen Lord tells us that love overcomes the sharpness of death, and that the life of God is the destination to which we travel in the difficult roads of this world.

Along the way, we can be confident that we will be refreshed and strengthened. 'Blessed are those whose strength is in you,' writes the psalmist in Psalm 84, '...who going through the barren valley find there a spring, and the early rains will clothe it with blessing.'

As the Dean said in his Easter homily, we need to be careful not to blow too hard upon the flame of joy. Instead we treat it gently, nurture it inwardly

and in our doings with and for others – and trust in God for the rest.

Prayer for the Day

None of us is a great Christian; we are all humble and ordinary. But your grace is enough for us. Arouse in us that small degree of joy and thankfulness of which we are capable, to the timid faith which we can muster, to the cautious obedience which we cannot refuse, and thus to the wholeness of life which you have prepared for us through the death and resurrection of your Son. Do not allow any of us to remain apathetic or indifferent to the wondrous glory of Easter, but let the light of our risen Lord reach every corner of our dull hearts.

Karl Barth

From here, the Reflections appeared three times a week.

15 April 2020

As part of my obsessive browsing of news, I've read a few different accounts of the 'stages' of lockdown, from people in countries who have been locked down longer than we have.

They all say the same thing: that the initial heightened responses to crisis, the first outpourings of mutual support, the first ingenious ways to keep in touch by other means, to seek ways to help the situation, to keep busy and cheerful – these come under strain as the time goes on. As we shift from crisis response to an unwished 'new normal', all its difficulties become more and more visible. It's just much easier to put up with something for weeks than for months, because you don't have to pace yourself.

I'm noticing the shift to a more accepting and yet more frustrated mode of living too, and the different kinds of anxieties it brings to the surface.

And I'm noticing, too, the things which help. Keeping some kind of routine, including a routine of prayer which gives into God's hands the grieving and the fearful, those facing the loss of

livelihoods and security, those for whom being stuck at home is deeply stressful or even dangerous.

But also being ready to notice small joys and satisfactions in these odd days. Seeing two nesting swans in a single day on a single walk. Growing tomato plants by burying a leftover tomato slice from the fridge, and watching its seeds sprout. The quiet which means that the loudest noise for much of the day and in the evenings is birdsong. Small kindnesses received and given. The reach of my anxieties seems to span the world, but the reach of my gratitude is very close by.

I was wondering the other day what 'Easter' means when the world is still forced into patience, into waiting and suffering. Some of that meaning might be found much closer to home than the big stage of dark happenings. When Mary Magdalene wept in the garden, she could hardly have imagined how close to her was the person for whom she was crying.

One definition of prayer is 'paying attention'. When we can do nothing else, we can do that. The blessings of Christ's risen life may be standing quietly just behind us, waiting for us to notice

them, to turn and look at something which was there all the time.

Prayer for the Day

Because the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost, we pray –

For those who have lost people dear to them and whose hearts are sad;

For those who have lost their health and vitality;

For those who have lost their livelihood;

For those who have lost their security;

For those who have lost patience;

For those who have lost faith;

For all wounded in the battle of life who are near despair.

Give to us all such a vision of Christ's risen life that we may trust his power; that we too may know that nothing can separate us from thy loving purposes.

So may we rise up from all our distress and despair and take heart again; walk with Christ, the companion of our souls, to whatever lies in store for us, to find at last that faith has its own rewards, that we have not missed our way, that the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which seemed lost for ever.

We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leslie J. Weatherhead (adapted)

18 April 2020

Something has happened to my perception of time. I can't tell if each day is short or long; moments stretch out; hours vanish unpredictably. The days since lockdown can feel like one long day; at other times it feels as if we have lived many months of this different kind of life.

I look at those lost segmented days before the world closed, days when I was fully dominated by clock-time, by back-to-back meetings and presentations and hurried admin, adrenalin-driven and astonishingly crowded, and I wonder where my eyes and ears were all that time.

Some days are still led by clock time; back-to-back video meetings still happen. And each day is supported by communal prayer morning and afternoon. All the same, I am more opened up to the ways that time and space stretch or contract when the timetable has loosened, when the world of events is so much emptier.

Small pleasures have become very intense. Will the mallard ducklings be out, scooting anxiously after their parent on the flooded field? Is the heron

fishing today? Will we play a board game after supper? A card comes from a friend through the post; or there's a moment of unexpected conversation across the social distancing gap, and the day seems – almost literally – brighter.

I find myself hoping that – whatever we return to when the world opens again – we will not lose all of this unexpected treasure, which I was so much too busy to notice before. 'To have blessings and to prize them', wrote the seventeenth century poet Thomas Traherne, 'is to be in Heaven; to have them and not to prize them, to be in Hell, I would say, upon Earth.' Who would have imagined that heaven – and hell – were both so close by?

I still can't make sense of the small space of my life alongside the enormity of the events, experiences and losses just out of sight. I go on reading the news, hungry for something which will join them up, help me understand. I can't bridge the huge gap between the world's events and tragedies and the little life opening up in front of me. But, remembering Traherne's words, I hope it is still right to accept everyday blessings. Perhaps a reverent attention to what is, weak and small as it seems, may, like seeds emerging through soil, begin to brighten the wider world in ways we cannot

imagine.

Prayer for the Day

Nowhere need I run to seek thee, but within me where
already thou art. Thou art the treasure hidden within me;
draw me therefore to thee that I may find thee and serve thee
and possess thee for ever.

Walter Hilton (adapted)

20 April 2020

I've been thinking about the presence of Jesus, and about this Church of ours which can't physically meet together – particularly at Easter. Easter was the time when the risen Jesus showed the physicality of his living being in every way he possibly could. He ate honeycomb and boiled fish. He showed the damage of the torture he had endured on his real, living flesh. He invited a companion to touch the wounds in his hands, to put his hand inside the wound in his side.

But he also said to Mary Magdalene, 'don't touch me' because he had 'not yet ascended to the Father'. His ascension – his withdrawing from physical space – was what would make it possible for Jesus to be present to anyone, and at any time, for the rest of history in the rest of the world.

In happier and easier times than these, the Church knows how important it is really to meet: to share a common cup, to eat real bread and drink real wine. And we can't do all that, and we don't know when we'll next be able to, or what modifications to physical touch and closeness we will still have to

make when we do next meet.

We do what we can. We use the technological resources which make us present to each other visually and audibly. We pray in ways that join us through our God who isn't subject to space and time as we are. We rely on God to bring us into communion when we can't do it ourselves.

All the same, though, we really do pine. It *is* a deep loss not to be able to be in each other's company, just as it was for Mary Magdalene not to be able to hold on to the Lord. The gift of lockdown is that it shows us our need, not that we don't have that need any more.

The mystical seventeenth-century poet Thomas Traherne, who I quoted on Saturday, writes that it is a great gift to know that we are 'infinitely obliged' to God. For, he says: 'If want be a treasure, sure everything is so.' He means that we recognise the value of everything because sometimes we have to long for necessities we don't have.

So perhaps the greatest gift of being locked down is in understanding how much we need to be together. Jesus is at every solitary meal, every sparse table – but what he promises, what he joins us up to, is not a Zoom meeting, or watching a film

of someone eating. It is – for ever and everywhere –
a real, physical, communal feast.

Prayer for the Day

Lord Jesus, be our guest

And may this food by you be blessed.

Lutheran Grace before a meal

22 April 2020

It is Earth Day today, and fifty years since the first Earth Day, in 1970. And in all those fifty years – indeed in my whole lifetime – the earth has never been so quiet as it is now. Polluted skies are clear over Hubei and over Delhi. Fallow deer have rested in the front gardens of East London, mountain goats taken over the streets and gardens of Llandudno. Walking in the evening I saw deer and rabbits peacefully grazing in a field near the river. When I came nearer, they saw no need to move.

Of course, this strange peace is temporary, and artificially supported on a package of measures (in the UK, at least) which attempt to alleviate, at least in part, the dire effects on people's livelihoods when we close down society. But we're getting to notice some good things, too. The pressure to acquire *stuff*, just for the sake of it, just because it's advertised and we are told we ought to want it, has vanished. It's been replaced by the pleasures of improvising, managing, re-using, being thrifty. Slow joys come back – like knitting, or growing things. We have a family birthday today: no outing is possible, but there has been great satisfaction in conserving just enough of the scarce flour for the

cake!

I hope that when the world opens up again, enough of us will remember how good it feels to have *just enough*. I hope that we will remember that when, as a society, we recognise an emergency, there really is stuff we can do together to tackle it – on a really big scale. That it is possible – urgent – to plan for a viable longer-term future and to balance that future, the world our children will inherit, against today's short-term pleasures and greeds. That we are part of a complex life-system which is delicately balanced, and our needs are best met by paying attention to the needs of the rest of the system. The diseases which, like Covid-19, cross from animal to human, become much more likely when we invade wild habitat and leave those animals nowhere to be.

When human beings worship God the Creator, they are remembering that they are creatures. We are not gods; we belong inside a system upon which our own wellbeing depends. Remembering to be small, in the bigness of the created world, involves thinking about the complex interdependent web of living things on our world. Our eyeline lifts up, and our imaginative timeline gets longer, when we remember to be small. It allows us to marvel at the greatness of all those things bigger than our desires,

and to put the longer timeframe of the planet's wellbeing at the centre of all our hope for the future.

Prayer for the Day

Lord, purge our eyes to see, Within the seed a tree, Within the glowing egg a bird, Within the shroud, a butterfly. Till, taught by such, we see Beyond all creatures, thee And hearken to thy tender word And hear its 'Fear not; it is I'.

Christina Rossetti

25 April 2020

‘The world seems to have got colder,’ said an interviewee to a BBC reporter. He was talking about what it felt like to manage without physical touch. Touch is the first sense to develop in the womb, and another’s touch can soothe pain and calm stress. It is not usual, or easy, for human beings to manage for weeks on end without touching each other.

We are not made for isolation. Humanity is connected, sociable, mutually reliant. When it’s my turn to livestream worship, it feels really odd – indeed terrifying – to speak to an almost empty room. To be in company, meeting people’s eyes would be completely different. The Christian community, like many other communities, calls itself a ‘body’ because a body is intimate, unified, each limb or organ dependent upon the others for the whole body to flourish.

But people do not always have the luxury of being in the same space. And, at the moment, we don’t. Fortunately we are also very creative about how to connect. Our New Testament is made up of written accounts which bring us close to events we never saw in the flesh. Jesus comes to us that way,

through the Gospels; and today we celebrate the writer of perhaps the earliest of these Gospels, a writer we call 'Mark', whose account of Jesus's life, death and resurrection may have been learnt directly from the apostle Peter in Rome. We cannot know the writer's face and we are not even sure of his name, but through his words we have a dramatic, raw, immediate access to the Jesus who taught and healed and died and rose.

Even when alone we are part of the Body: 'joined and knitted together by every ligament'. Those are words from the New Testament letter to the Christians at Ephesus, and the letter goes on to say that the proper working of a 'body' of faithful Christians, where each part supports each other, will 'build itself up in love'.

We learn to value our connections especially when they are threatened or rare. I have sometimes felt closer to people in this time of isolation than I did when I was rushing round busily. The theologian Erasmus said something similar about knowing Jesus from the Gospel writers: that he was 'more present' in that form than he could have been face to face. There are blessings in the creative ways we get round being physically apart, and some of them – like the Gospel accounts themselves – are lasting

ones. We can, thank God, be touched by love, even when no physical hand is near.

Prayer for the Day

God be in my head, and in my understanding;

God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;

God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;

God be in my heart, and in my thinking;

God be at mine end, and at my departing.

27 April 2020

Easter – the first Easter – didn't start with joy, not for most of the people we hear and read about in the Gospels. Easter started with grief and fear; with bewilderment; with hiding away from a danger of unknown proportions. As the Easter season lengthens out, we read more stories of those grieving people – locked away indoors, or creeping early and fearfully to Jesus's tomb to weep, hoping not to be stopped by police, or walking away from the dangers of Jerusalem in a kind of stunned despair. Easter doesn't arise out of being expectant, or even hopeful – no one in these stories is looking forward to anything good. They are suffering and stunned. The best they can manage is a kind of endurance, a keeping in touch with each other.

When Jesus comes to his companions, his joy, the peace he offers, is utterly unexpected. As the 'Collect' (the prayer for this week) puts it, he 'gladdened their eyes' with the sight of him, astonishingly alive.

Quite a number of those Jesus loved took a while to recognise him. Perhaps that's why the Collect asks God to 'give us such knowledge of Jesus's presence

with us' – because for us, too, his divine and life-giving company can be hard to perceive amidst the patient endurance, the loneliness, the uncertainty and the grief of our present human situation.

Today the Church remembers the poet Christina Rossetti, a faithful Christian who also knew what it was like to struggle with sorrow and a sense of isolation. She wrote a poem, 'A Better Resurrection', which also prays that she might be 'quicken'd' into life by the presence of the risen Jesus. She wrote:

I have no wit, no words, no tears;
My heart within me like a stone
Is numb'd too much for hopes or fears;
Look right, look left, I dwell alone;
I lift mine eyes, but dimm'd with grief
No everlasting hills I see;
My life is in the falling leaf:
O Jesus, quicken me.

As the weeks lengthen, and the adrenalin of crisis drains away, that numb endurance can bring with it a sense that nothing new or life-giving can come to us. But perhaps, as with the sorrowful men and women of the first Easter, there are unexpected blessings, an unlooked for and sustaining presence,

waiting just where we have not thought to look.

Prayer for the Day

Almighty Father,

who in your great mercy gladdened the disciples

with the sight of the risen Lord,

give us such knowledge of his presence with us,

that we may be strengthened and sustained by his risen life

and serve you continually in righteousness and truth;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Collect for the 3rd Sunday of Easter

29 April 2020

Like many others, I observed the minute's silence yesterday for NHS workers who have died of Covid-19 in the course of their duties, and offered a prayer for them and for their families. Afterwards, I spent some time looking at the faces and names and little biographies on the BBC website, at the great variety of duties those men and women fulfilled, from discharge clerk to porter to midwife to consultant to nurse or healthcare assistant, imaging the webs of love and care from which they were torn from the sparse bits of information about them. It gave me some sense, however inadequate, of how much smaller and poorer the world has become because we have lost such swathes of remarkable, ordinary, good people, people doing their jobs until they couldn't any more, in order that other lives might be saved.

In the midst of the carnage of the First World War, one woman asked of her brother, 'When we pray for the dead, for what do we pray?' She asked it because at the time there was a row going on in Parliament about whether the dead could be included in church prayers, or whether the dead were beyond our intercession when they went

beyond our care. But people still needed to pray for those they loved, and the fact that they had died wasn't to them as important as the fact that they wanted to express that love somehow, to keep their names in the circle of the living. And that makes sense to me.

So I don't worry about what exactly I pray for those men and women, of different faiths and none, who did not expect to die and should not have done, but cared for others anyway. It seems plain to me that we pray for them not for their wellbeing but for ours, because it will diminish our souls if we do not honour them. The old prayer, 'let light perpetual shine upon them' imagines the individual nature of every person loved and known always under the gaze of heaven's perpetual shining, never extinguished by the darkness of death and loss but held in life by God.

And when we pray for them, perhaps those prayers are a kind of small light defying the darkness.

Prayer for the Day

Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord
And may light perpetual shine upon them.

2 May 2020

Apparently 45% of the British are getting through lockdown by gardening – so says *The Economist* – more than are baking, or reading. Online plant sales outlets are overwhelmed, even more so than flour mills. We really are a nation of gardeners, it seems; and the number of us who have access to a little bit of gardening ground is much higher than for people in other countries in Europe.

It's definitely true for me. As I go round the many trays of seedlings my heart lifts. In the last few drab days of rain, the soaked ground made me happy with the kind of happiness you feel when you are watching a hungry person tuck into a meal. The evening that the sun finally came out and lit the young leaves I was filled up with a sense of joy so sudden and so strong that it took me completely by surprise.

It's a strong and welcome contrast to the constant video-conferencing which punctuates the day – even for Morning and Evening Prayer. Video screens must necessarily dominate all attempts to spend time with people or discuss anything work-related, and it's good to have them, of course; but

they are intense, tiring and clunky. They seem to thin the mind out, somehow.

Video-conferencing is immediate, touch-free – and stressful. But working in the garden is intensely physical, touch-dependent, and yet it always looks forward to something which has not yet come to be, whether it's the tomatoes the seedlings will grow later in the season or the open flower promised by its bud. Gardening is hopeful because it's being fully in the here-and-now but looking always towards the fruition of the work you're immersed in.

So it's not surprising that prophets offer images of growing gardens to help us imagine the hope God brings in difficult times. In the Book of Job the stump of a felled tree grows a new shoot at 'the scent of water'. In the prophecy of Isaiah the hope of a fair and just society is compared to the sown seeds springing up in a garden. The prophet Hosea says that the Lord will come to us 'like the spring rain that waters the earth'.

We don't know what is ahead of us, except that changes are coming to our isolated lives, at a rate which will be different for different people, with uncertain timing and in forms not yet fully

imagined. But whatever is ahead, we can live expectantly, ready to attend to the signs of living green in the world into which we eventually emerge. It won't be the one we left, for sure. But there is always room for hope in the future.

Prayer for the Day

Dear God, there are times when I hear your voice most clearly in greenness; in the singing of sap, the conversations of the leaves, the whisperings of shoot and stem, root and cell, calling me back to creation to feel again the freshness of you running through everything like a bright emerald current. God of greenness, you know well my tendency to fill my life with my own methods of communication. Thank you for constantly returning me to the simplicity of yours.

Joy Cowley

4 May 2020

I was a worshipper at the live streamed eucharist from the Cathedral (aka the Dean's study) yesterday.

Like many in the church, I have thoughts, questions and even doubts about live streamed eucharists – or indeed eucharists through video-conferencing platforms – but during this emergency of closed churches I am grateful to be able to worship somehow through watching my computer screen. I am absolutely sure that it *is* worship that we do, and that even through the technological veil we are joined as one body, the Body of Christ. I don't think the Holy Spirit will be hampered by little local difficulties like time and space, and I'm happy to trust God for the outcome.

I'm struck by the things which are made *easy* by screened worship. I don't really mean the little conveniences like not having to travel anywhere, or to dress up – though they are handy, for sure. But I was thinking about the way that looking at a framed scene is like looking at an icon. So it's a much more single-minded experience than being part of a group of people inside a big building. You

can't choose, or alter, your angle of vision, it's chosen for you. The person who is your focus can't look back at you.

Yet the engagement isn't passive. You expect the scene you watch to change you, just as we expect participating in the Eucharist in church to be an experience of being changed. The bright picture of the altar-table in its setting shines in the eye of the imagination, uncomplicated by taste or temperature or touch or smell or conversation with a neighbour. It's an oddly private experience, closer to domestic prayer than public worship. You have to concentrate on the work of being present to it, and the real world is always ready to distract.

So I am very grateful for the structure imposed by having to respond – to say things aloud, to affirm the creed, to say the Lord's Prayer and the prayer of spiritual communion. Speaking the words doesn't take you into the picture, exactly, but it does allow you to watch through an open door, remembering that Jesus always has particular pity for people left on the outside.

For, despite appearances, even in online worship we are part of a crowd, being healed, washed, illuminated, enriched; being brought together in

intimacy with God and our neighbour. We are one
– but never alone.

Prayer for the Day

We approach the sacrament of the passion our Lord Jesus Christ. As sick, we come to the physician of life; as unclean, to the fountain of mercy; as blind, to the light of eternal splendour; as needy, to the Lord of heaven and earth. Heal our sickness, wash our foulness, lighten our darkness, enrich our poverty; that we may be incorporated into the mystical body of thy Son and be reckoned amongst its members; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thomas Aquinas (adapted)

6 May 2020

Perhaps affected by the change and uncertainty in the air as we seek to discern the least bad route between the privations of lockdown and the dangers of freedom, I woke very early. I gave it half an hour and then gave up on sleep as the light greyed.

It seemed a rare chance to see the early world of the river, so I took myself there.

As I came towards the water meadows, the sun had risen, and the water was a sheet of flat gold. Ducks swam upon it like shadows. A cuckoo called, unmistakable. By the water's edge the extended families of the geese stood sentry for jostling fluffball crowds of goslings – I counted 48. The buttercups were closed tight and iced with frost. Over on the flooded wildlife reserve the pools were a colour which isn't silver, and isn't grey, and isn't a deep camouflage green, but contains all those shades. The dog roses were beginning to open, tight pale pyramids against their thorns, and a blackbird sang at the very top of a bush of may. A muntjac deer strolled casually down a little lane, and rabbits scampered at my approach, rocking up and down

like mechanical toys.

It's not an empty world when we aren't there, that's for sure.

When King David was dying, in the face of all the uncertainty and jockeying for power which his death would bring, he spoke of justice in government. He said that the just ruler 'shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun rises, a morning without clouds, when the tender grass springs out of the earth, through clear shining after rain.' (2 Sam.23.4) Thinking of that, I noticed how very much it was an image for a crisis endured: light after darkness, sunshine after a downpour.

In the cold, gleaming air, full of birdsong, I hoped that impartial and compassionate judgement would guide the next decisions made on our behalf: that in the more ambiguous time which follows immediate crisis we would remember what we learnt from the darkness and the downpour and not simply re-set exactly to the-world-as-it-was. That the poor, the weak, and the endangered would be protected. We have learnt something, these last months, about how much we need each other, and about our fragility in the sight of heaven. It would be a shame to forget it instantly.

Like Christian, the pilgrim in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, our glimpses of the Celestial City are most needed when glimpsed from the valley of the shadow of death.

And by and by the day broke; then said CHRISTIAN, 'He hath turned the shadow of death into the morning.'

Prayer for the Day

Eternal God, our heavenly Father, who lovest us with an everlasting love, and can turn the shadow of death into the morning; speak to us afresh thy gracious promises; that through patience and the comfort of the Scriptures we may have hope, and be lifted above our darkness and distress and into the comfort and peace of thy presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

9 May 2020

It's been a very video week. Video Mattins. Video Evening Prayer. Video breakfast group. Video funeral. Video coffee time. Video in-depth conversations. Video meetings, meetings, meetings, meetings.

I've emerged over and over again from screen-immersion into real space, thoroughly stiff and a bit disoriented. Who knew sitting still was so tiring? But when I thought about it, I realised that people do astonishing imaginative work to 'meet' each other through the screen. Even with the prompt of the images we see, we have to do a lot in order to project ourselves into the places beyond our bodies, to be truly present in spirit.

There are all the things we have to manage without in video meetings. The angles at which people sit to each other when together in a room. The body language – turned towards, or away, leaning backwards or forwards. Meeting eyes, looking up, looking down. In prayer, the signs of attention, concentration: the folded or open hands, straight backs or downcast eye lines. The signs, so much more subtle than any of these, which tell you if

someone's tired, or upset, or restless, or bored.

Then there are all the things which are much more exposing. The screens of close-up faces, so that if these were real face-to-face meetings everyone would be sitting in a tight circle staring hard at each other, too close for comfort. Every twitch, every fidget relayed by the camera. The mute/don't mute rules about speaking, so that it's rather like skipping with a big rope, where you have to judge exactly the right point of the swing to speak successfully.

But then there are, against all the odds, wonderful moments, too. Seeing faces you haven't seen for a while, smiling, close. The experience of sitting, together yet miles apart, in silent prayer, joined in the presence of God hearing a bird singing several miles away through someone else's window. Forgetting, in the rush of connection, that you even *are* apart, blessed in the meeting of minds.

Prayer and video meetings aren't as far apart as I originally thought. For both, the mind and heart have to rush ahead of the senses to do the real, true work of meeting. For both, the physical body yearns towards something beyond its confines. And for both, that yearning finds its destination in

looking forward, in hope and expectation for a real meeting in the real body, somewhere and sometime.

As for me, I shall see your face in righteousness, writes the psalmist confidently at the end of Psalm 17. For when I awake and behold your likeness, I shall be satisfied.

Prayer for the Day

Lift up our souls, O Lord, to the pure, serene light of thy presence; that there we may breathe freely, there repose in thy love, there may be at rest from ourselves, and from thence return, arrayed in thy peace, to do and bear what shall please thee; for thy holy name's sake.

E.B. Pusey

11 May 2020

My restless mind seems to be reflected in today's wild winds. I'm sitting watching the trees whipped backwards and forwards by fierce gusts, leaves streaming inside out as if they were being dragged along, taut as kites, thinking, no, I can't keep still either.

But it's not just weather. Some of my restlessness is the uncertainty of a nationally changing picture, and trying to work out how to respond to it, practically and emotionally. (*Are things getting better, when the death and infection figures are still so high? Have all those things we were so worried about only a few days ago magically gone away since the weekend?*) Nothing feels all that steady, somehow.

Today's prayer, used as a bookmark by Teresa of Avila, doesn't comfort so much as confront my state of mind. It is so direct, so clear – and so very, very hard. *Trust in God. All things pass.* To pray her prayer you have – in part – to sit above the earth borrowing a God's eye view, as the prophecy of Isaiah does. *He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers.* But at the

same time you know you are just a grasshopper yourself.

And yet. Knowing that God never changes, that he is not shaken by the wind – that is reassuring. Like the way that the green of spring goes on unfolding whatever happens to human beings, God's steadfastness offers a limit to our own uncertainties, a place of stillness and clarity. We come back over and over again to one who cannot be unseated, whose eye holds us steady when we are stumbling.

This too will pass, says the plaque at the entrance to Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge. I've wondered sometimes how many find it comforting, and why exactly it should be. But it is.

Patience achieves all it strives for, say Teresa of Avila's prayer. There's a mystery in that sentence somewhere. For what does patience strive? Is it acceptance? Understanding? Even wisdom? 'Patience' means enduring suffering; can there be peace in endurance? And, if it is so peaceful, why the struggle of striving for it?

But then I put it aside. *He who has God finds he lacks nothing*. The still centre isn't a skill. It's a gift.

Prayer for the Day

Trust in God.

Let nothing disturb you,
let nothing frighten you;
all things pass:

God never changes.

Patience achieves
all it strives for.

He who has God
finds he lacks nothing,
God alone suffices.

Teresa of Avila

13 May 2020

My diary is filling up again. Not with the kinds of emergency arrangements there were in the first few weeks of this strange time, but with reinstated routine appointments, now happening through the screen instead of in person.

Before this week, almost every meeting was about responding to our new and bewildering situation. Now they aren't. They look back to the past world, the world of 'business as usual', a world when other things beside the virus could make their way up the 'urgent' list.

As they must. It's the difference between hoping that the disagreeable guest will go away soon, and realising that actually the disagreeable guest has moved in. How do you live as well as possible round something so... *unacceptable*? What's a sustainable level of risk? What's a sustainable level of worry? What's a sustainable level of work? What's, even, a sustainable level of passivity?

And it is particularly confusing to be living with a guest who is not only disagreeable, but also completely invisible.

All these thoughts attempt to fix and control a situation which, for each individual person, can neither be fixed nor controlled, but only lived through with as much calm and grace as may be granted us.

We cannot control what we perceive, but we can allow God to help us alter the way that we perceive it. 'In your light we see light,' writes the psalmist. To rely on God is to be ready to see the same situation in a different light: not the perspective of our own imperfect understanding but illuminated by the calm looking of the Father of lights, who knows what we need before we ask him. It means turning away our own fascinated gaze from what we fear and towards what we trust.

That's just as hard as it sounds. But maybe some of the answer does lie in doing the ordinary duty in front of us – whether that's the washing up, or a phone call, or a readiness to talk and listen, or even to sit through yet another video meeting. The services of love are not just good in themselves, they do us good too.

So I'm going to practise looking away from fear for a while, and concentrate on doing the next obvious

thing. Perhaps that will allow me to see everything differently, illuminated in a better light.

Prayer for the Day

Dispel, O Lord, and Father of lights, all clouds of doubt and the darkneses about our earthly course: that in thy light we may see light, and come both to know thee as we are known, and to love as we are loved; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

16 May 2020

When the world emptied out, and the roads and towns and cities were quiet, the space it made, though terrifying, was full of potential. The astonishing silence had some of the qualities of a white page, that moment before the first stroke of the pen.

Part of the eeriness of what happened was simply that it *could* happen, that the world as we knew it could come to a stop. That the planes could stop flying, the supposedly insoluble problem of people without shelter could be solved by putting them up in hotels, the constant rumble of traffic noise fade to birdsong.

Most extraordinary of all was that, briefly but very publicly, we together recognised the reality of something called 'the public good'. In old fashioned language we rediscovered the 'common weal' – that the wellbeing of each person was to be found in being joined up to everyone else. We could see with unusual clearness that communities only work because our levels of mutual trust, justified and underlined by genuinely trustworthy public decision-making, were literally vital for the health

of society. We knew, for a little while, that we all needed each other, weak and strong.

Of course it was very imperfect. Public trust was not always well or reliably met. The vulnerable still suffered – and suffer – disproportionately to those with resource. And the silence could only be temporary, because it isn't possible for societies to come indefinitely to a stop.

But I hope we don't forget it all as the world begins to move again. I hope we notice that rough sleepers die young without shelter, that the poor are more likely to have 'underlying health conditions' than the rich. That it only takes two months without the planes flying for our ailing planet to begin to recover. That the value of a human being isn't measured by 'productivity', but by love, the love expressed, in this country alone, in 34,000 short and tender obituaries. That sometimes it is really worth it to put another's wellbeing before a fleeting satisfaction of one's own.

We might start to wonder whether there is something particularly special about that word 'Love', that it has the strange power to turn the way you value things and people upside-down. Whether perhaps 'Love' really does make the world

go round.

We might, even, venture to guess Love's name.

Prayer for the Day

O God of patience and consolation, grant we beseech thee that with free hearts we may love and serve thee and our brethren; and, having thus the mind of Christ, may begin heaven on earth, and exercise ourselves therein until that day when heaven, where love abideth, shall seem no strange habitation to us; for Jesus Christ's sake.

Christina Rossetti

From here on, the Reflections appeared twice a week.

18 May 2020

Today, says my Daily Prayer app, is a 'Rogation Day'. A day for asking for God's protection; a day to bless the crops; a day to offer thanksgiving for the growing season; a day to 'beat the bounds' – to process around the limits of the parish boundary. The three days before Ascension Day are – formally at least - given over to this odd, historically layered mixture of blessing and asking, invoking protection and remembering to say thank you for natural abundance.

I have only once gone to 'beat the bounds', with a parish in central Cambridge, joining a great long procession which took banners, acolytes, bells and incense across meadows to flick holy water at bemused cows and flotillas of sceptical-looking ducks. Daft and even chaotic though it was, it moved me.

I think of it now, on this Rogation day of 2020, fresh from a weekend of online worship where neither place nor bodies nor bounds can be allowed much sacred meaning. It's all about the head and the heart, just now. We reach to each other with voice and sight, text and image, but the meeting of flesh

with flesh, or flesh with earth, or stone, or green wheat: that's a lost world, except in the private paradise of the garden. No wonder we are finding such solace in growing things.

But we can still say thank you for the blessings of the seasons. We can still offer intercession, asking God's protection upon the exposed, the endangered, those whose livelihoods have vanished or are vanishing, upon the hungry and the fearful. We can notice the good things about our relationships and picture those apart from us with love.

We can continue to learn the disciplines of praise and prayer, and to hope for better times.

Prayer for the Day

O God, we praise thee for the day of light and life, for the night which brings rest and sleep, and for the ordered course of nature, seedtime and harvest. We bless thee for the joy of children, the wisdom of the old. We thank thee for the love of God and man which shines forth in ordinary lives; and above all for the vision of thyself, in loneliness and in fellowship, in communion and in prayer; for these and all other benefits we praise and glorify thy name, now and ever. Amen

Book of Worship for Church and Home... according to the Usages of the Methodist Church (adapted).

21 May 2020: Ascension Day

We live by faith, and not only by sight.

That's how we live in the whole of life. It's not confined to our faith in God, and it's not about some heroic effort of believing in six impossible things before breakfast. It's as natural as believing in the sustaining presence of a parent who is absent from your eye. It's as fundamental as knowing the stairs are still there when the light is off and it's dark outside.

As we get older, the things which give us meaning and structure in our lives are more and more of them invisible. We are held in love by memories of things and people gone from us, by buildings long demolished, by internalized learning both factual and emotional, by webs of relationship with people and communities we can no longer see or touch. During this pandemic we rely heavily on those invisible webs which shine with meaning, holding us in place and feeding us when all the visible signs of our lives' connected structures – the meetings, the shared meals, the workplaces and cafes and groups – have disappeared. Everything we have, every relationship, every memory, every decision,

is soaked with faith.

When Jesus was born, a lifeline was thrown between God's invisible being and our world of sight and touch. And when he 'withdrew' from his companions and 'was carried up into heaven', the lifeline was still there. He had not stopped blessing them when he was taken into the heart of God's being: the strong narrow web of silk between his love and our need still quivers in the air. 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?' asked the messengers of God. The road is still open. Faith fills your heart even when sight fails you. 'Do not doubt but believe.'

The angels' words to Jesus's companions are words for us now. We, even more than Jesus's disciples, live in a world where touch and sight are marketed as the only means to belief, even though we also live in a world where what we see is often a skillful illusion, and – for the foreseeable future – where we are forbidden the reassurances of touch. But there is much, much more to truth and love than touch and sight, powerful though they are. We are beings who live upon memory and hope, and without those powerful messengers of joy we cannot thrive.

So don't be afraid to hold tight to your lifelines, to

memory and to hope. Though Jesus is withdrawn from our sight, his blessing is for ever continuing, extending into the world of time and space across centuries and miles, coming down upon us like the showers that water the earth.

'This Jesus...will come in the same way as you saw him go' said the angels: memory and hope offer the same promise, of meeting and touching, of knowing and being known, of love and joy and hope and peace.

All that you have loved, all that makes you the person you are, all the hopes that you foster or have ever fostered, come together in the God who joins past and future to make even a barren and lonely present beautiful. Do not doubt but believe: Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and for ever.

Prayer for the Day

Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus
Christ
to have ascended into the heavens,
so we in heart and mind may also ascend
and with him continually dwell;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

June 1 2020: The Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth

(Canon Martin took a week's leave after Ascension Day.)

So what is happening today?

Cities in flames. Frightened people, desperate at their losses. The powerful hide behind their power. The deaths mount up across the continents. The dutiful continue to save as many lives as they can. The vulnerable wonder what will come next for them. Men reach again for the stars. Men hope not to die in the gutter.

Across the world people long to keep on breathing.

Is that everything that is happening today?

Somewhere, in a some time which is everywhere and every time, a pregnant girl in a tiny occupied country travelled into the hills to see her cousin. No one knew or cared what she was doing or where she was going, for many other great events were playing on that world's stage and she was nobody much.

Who knows why she went? Perhaps she hoped for understanding – for she was unmarried as well as pregnant, and she knew that her cousin, old as she was, carried a child too.

What could be more insignificant than a middle-aged woman, or more vulnerable than a pregnant girl? Who cares what they thought, or felt, or did? Each of them carried a precious load, a new life; but then – there are so many babies in the world, and so many of them die.

The girl came across the threshold and called her greeting. And the older woman was filled up, all of a sudden, with an inexplicable joy. And she cried, *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the babe in my womb leapt for joy.*

And the girl said, *My soul magnifies the Lord.*

And she saw in that moment that the life of God comes down like rain in dry places, until the arid land fills up with pools of water, and the hungry fill up with good things; that the greatness of God

scatters the impoverished plans of the arrogant to the winds, and that the mighty – if they are lucky – discover that they are small in His sight.

That young girl will one day learn that God would rather die with the despised and rejected in the gutter than hide from truth in the palaces of princes. Even now, dimly, she recognizes that the joy of the new life she carries will pierce her soul; that love is always bound up with loss.

But she doesn't dwell on that. She says, *From now on all generations will call me blessed.* From now on, every person ever born has the infinite weight and value of the God who died despised and rejected, and the door to His mercy is always open.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Prayer for the Day

Mighty God,
by whose grace Elizabeth rejoiced with Mary
and greeted her as the mother of the Lord:
look with favour on your lowly servants
that, with Mary, we may magnify your holy name
and rejoice to acclaim her Son our Saviour,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

4 June 2020

A few weeks ago things were dire, but simple. The messages were simple. The rules were simple. The dangers were simple.

Now the world seems so complicated I do not know how to write about it. Even the question, *what is the most important thing for people just now*, is hard to answer. Because although we are still firmly in the grip of a terrible global pandemic, it's not the only thing happening.

We are having to look at the cruel damage that the misuse of power imposes upon those who have little, or none. It happens starkly – as in the murder of George Floyd – and it happens in subtler ways, too. In our own country, the common narrative of shared danger is giving way to a different and much more fractured national mood. We seem to be embroiled in a mass of different squabbles about what our – still extremely grim – national statistics might mean for the immediate and longer-term future, and for different vulnerable groups. The common weal is no longer the clear and overwhelming motive for our public decisions.

Not that those decisions are easy. They aren't. Every course of action exerts its cost on somebody. But it sometimes feels as if we have lost the patience to listen.

The prophet Isaiah wrote about justice from God's perspective, in a passage which Christians read as envisioning the coming of Christ. It says a surprising thing – that the one who will come, the one upon whom the 'Spirit of wisdom and understanding' will rest, 'will not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear'.

That sounds like a God who might ignore 'evidence' (what the eyes see) or 'testimony' (what the ears hear) – but that's not what Isaiah means. He goes on to say this: 'With righteousness he will judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.'

So Isaiah is saying that true justice is not about who has the power to get your attention. It's not about who grabs your ear by shouting loud enough, or who makes sure he's shouldered his way into your presence. It's not about getting your photo-opportunity, your platform, in a space made ready for you by terrifying people with rubber bullets and tear gas, while you use a Bible as a kind of theatre

prop.

The justice of God pays attention to those who don't get their faces onscreen, listens to those whose voices are not heard. He knows the sorrows and damage of people for whom the world has little time, and reserves his tenderness for the forgotten. Without God, how would human beings ever have space or grace to honour all those who live outside the unstable bubbles of our collective interest? I would not like to have to rely on a purely human understanding of what it is to be just, or fair, or kind.

Last Sunday we celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit of God – the Comforter, the Advocate. That Spirit's comfort is comfort for those who suffer, and defence for those with no other redress. It's not always time to speak. Sometimes it's time to listen.

Prayer for the Day

O Holy Spirit of God, giver of life: Come into our hearts, we beseech thee; that enlightened by thy clear shining, and warmed by thine unselfish love, our souls may be revived to the worship of God, and our lives be dedicated anew to the service of others; for Jesus Christ's sake.

8 June 2020

This day's reflection was also the sermon for Trinity Sunday.

Every service we do in the Cathedral starts the same way: 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.'

What's in a name? Why do we name the names of God?

The power of naming is a very great power. We speak the names of the dead in love, in anguish, in tenderness, in protest. We write them upon our monuments, whisper them in our sacred spaces, shout them in the public square. Through naming we honour those in danger of being forgotten, respect those who might in their lifetimes have received scant respect.

When we name and revere Jesus as the Son of God, we name one who himself received scant respect in the days of his flesh and died through an act of deliberate violence. The Almighty God, for whom the nations, the powers of our own world are so tiny as to be 'accounted less than nothing and

emptiness', comes close to every sorrowful soul, because God in Jesus has known weakness and sorrow.

Naming *calls out*, making the person we name visible to the eyes of the heart. And when we name the dead, we do it because they *cannot* answer. We do it because we hope God will hear their names, and vindicate their right to be remembered with honour.

But when we name God, we invoke his presence because God *can* answer. The names of God are power and protection, love and might, tenderness and majesty, comfort and defence, all at once. 'I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity' begins St Patrick's great hymn, a name echoed in things great and small, visible and invisible, strong and weak. God is God in his making of all things; and in his dying at the hands of his fellow human beings; and in his life-giving Spirit. When we name him we come close to the protection of his weakness and the tenderness of his strength. We come into his presence in awe but also in a need we know he will recognise. Our God acts in helplessness as well as in everlasting strength. He is never just one thing, though all things come together in his being and in the power

of his name.

So when you are feeling weak, name the name of God, and his strength will be with you. And when you rise up with renewed strength, do not forget the needs of those who are weak, because God looks out from within their souls and asks for your compassion.

Say his name, and bind it to yourselves, because through the naming of God all names are honoured, to the end of the age.

Prayer for the Day

Bless us, O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: that we may know thee as the Father who created us, rejoice in thee as the Son who redeemed us, and be strong in thee, as the Holy Spirit who makes us holy: keep us steadfast in this faith, and bring us into thine eternal kingdom, where thou are ever worshipped.

11 June 2020: The Feast of Corpus Christi

Corpus Christi: 'the Body of Christ'. What kind of body is that? The Feast itself, dating from the thirteenth century, focuses on the sacrament of the altar, the 'holy communion' which for so many of us is inaccessible at the moment.

So is this all about the bread we cannot eat, the wine we cannot share?

Yet we do not live 'by bread alone', as Jesus himself said, 'but by every word which proceeds out of the mouth of God'.

When we participate in the Eucharist, in 'holy communion', we hear the mysterious words Jesus spoke during the spring of (roughly) AD30, at the communal meal for which he was host on the night before his arrest, trial and execution. He broke bread and said, 'this is my body.' And he asked those who loved him to 'remember' what he had said and done as they ate together in the future.

Christians have gone on through the centuries, remembering, as he asked them to, witnessing to the broken bread and to Jesus's words as he blessed

and broke it, eating and drinking and praying together. We understood early on (helped by St Paul) that the 'Body of Christ' was the gathering of the faithful lovers of Christ, the followers of his life and his teaching, bound together in faith, in hope, in love.

More even than that: the lovers of Christ learn that we see him not only in that gathering, but in every needy human soul, and in every broken body. The Dean talked today of 'a broken body for a broken world' – for Jesus's words and actions point onwards to the breaking of his own body by a flawed judicial process, and in his suffering all the suffering of all the bodies in all the world comes together and is turned to... something else. One word we use for it is 'mercy' and another is 'redemption', the transforming of suffering into joy.

It is hard to live without the bread and the wine. And it is hard to live without the gathering. But we do not live only by the bread, and we do not lose each other entirely when parted, because we can remember, and hope, and even care for each other in love and in the hope of mercy.

Perhaps we cannot eat, this time. But we can look at what this wonderful sacrament tells us about the

ways of God.

That we find him in each other, in the needs of the world, in the weakness of God which is stronger than human strength, the foolishness of God which is wiser than human wisdom.

God is not far away from each one of us. He is in our mouths and our hearts for us to observe. We do not live by bread alone, for God is always close: in love, in pity. In the transforming of every broken thing into his eternal joy.

Prayer for the Day

Lord Jesus Christ,
we thank you that in this wonderful sacrament
you have given us the memorial of your passion:
grant us so to reverence the sacred mysteries
of your body and blood
that we may know within ourselves
and show forth in our lives
the fruits of your redemption;
for you are alive and reign with the Father
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

15 June 2020

Just as on every other lockdown day, I have not yet left the house or garden (though the dog has firm – and vocal – opinions about what I should do next, which will change that).

But in every other respect, my days are now just as busy, just as divided, and just as frantic as ever they were before the world altered in March. The only difference is that everything happens on screen. Sometimes I struggle to remember what it was like when the time stretched and the distractions of work went quiet.

I look at pictures of the queues for Primark on the news, and they make me wonder whether the whole thing has been a kind of dream. But it is all just as real as ever it was – the losses, the fear, the boredom, the heroism, the anxiety, the strange silences, the mourning, the kindness of strangers. Will anything of what we have learnt translate into the ‘new normal’ of life when we have more freedom? I notice how quickly I slip into the old patterns of stress and worry, how much less time I have for the kind of prayer which *listens*. Is it really so impossible to make time for that?

Today the Church remembers the spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill, who died on this day in the year 1941. A complex as well as a powerful writer, she balanced her longing for mystical spiritual experience with a strong sense of the importance of ordinary living, its plain kindness and its routines. For her, both duties and stillness are holy. Perhaps we might bring into the 'new normal' a different balance of duty to stillness. Perhaps it's important to make time not only to admire the peregrines flying around the West Tower with wild cries, but also to regard the bright, anxious eyes of the sitting sparrow waiting for her eggs to hatch in the birdbox. Perhaps there always needs to be time to wait and listen - especially since God is showing no signs of moving to communicating by email, text, phone or Zoom.

The shaken-up world of the last few months has – at times – made the lives and experiences of often-ignored people visible. And that's urgent, and necessary, and desperately important. Yet after the earthquake, wind and fire, there needs to be time for the still small voice, and space for that voice to speak.

My day so far hasn't been a marvellous example of

any of those good things. But perhaps I will do better tomorrow. *Return to the Lord, who will have mercy, writes the prophecy of Isaiah, to our God, who will richly pardon. My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

And that's a relief. We don't have to solve everything with our own capacities. We trust God for our daily bread; we ask for forgiveness for our failures of love; we honour every human being; and we work and hope and pray for God's kingdom to come.

Prayer for the Day

Your Spirit is not given that we may escape life's friction and demands, but so that we may live the common life as you would have it lived – on earth as in heaven.

Evelyn Underhill

19 June 2020

Well, it sounds ungrateful, but I am sick of videoconferencing.

It's not just that hours in the same chair makes my back hurt, or that the screen gives me a headache. It's how much I miss *meeting* people. Really meeting – not just seeing and hearing them. After the first shock of pleasure in seeing people's faces smiling from their screens, I can't help noticing that faces and voices are all we have.

I love people's voices. I get teased by my family because they say that if someone has a beautiful voice I will find them attractive regardless of their looks. They might be right, too. But even I don't find voices quite enough.

When you encounter someone you share space with them. The way they sit, stand and move is in relation to the way you sit, stand and move. People meeting together angle their bodies in relation to each other – or sometimes, tellingly, away from each other.

And, though it sounds fanciful to say it, it's as if

there's a border of energy around the limits of each physical body, the border which also marks how comfortable or uncomfortable it is to be close to somebody, the border which marks their invisible sphere of life. It radiates out from this marvellous, delicately balanced, complex, deeply practical mass of fleshly stuff which each one of us possesses, which intertwines the ordinary with the miraculous in what it can do and apprehend and imagine. Our brains and hearts speak as much through our hands as through our eyes, as much through our moving, our turning and our resting, as through our speaking.

The Christian faith is a faith of *incarnation* – a word which means being *in the flesh*. At Christmas we have a prayer which rejoices that in the human body of Christ we see the usually invisible God, and St Paul says something similar of Jesus: *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*

There's a lot of excitement in the Church over online possibilities in the future, and there is no doubt that online meetings are real blessings. But even though physical meetings need tremendous care and caution during this time of pandemic and will do for some time to come, there is still a

profound intimacy about our physical encounters. They feed the soul and the heart. I miss seeing people – or, rather, I miss that encounter which is more than sight. I miss being in someone’s presence.

God offers us an intimacy which is beyond sight or touch, beyond taste or smell or hearing. All those senses speak of that meeting and knowing which will be in the time beyond time, which lies beyond eye or ear or hand.

But he valued them all enough to become part of the world he had made, a body in that world, hearing birdsong and smelling bread as it baked, skinning his hands on planks and blistering his feet in the hot dust of midday. We do not live only in our heads. I never knew how sacred my meetings with other people were, how profound their bodily presence, until that presence was taken away.

Prayer for the Day

Merciful and most loving God, by whose will and bountiful gift thine eternal Son humbled himself that he might exalt humankind, and became flesh that he might renew in us the divine image: Perfect in us thy likeness, and bring us at last to rejoice in beholding thy beauty and, with all thy saints, to glorify thy grace; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

23 June 2020: Feast of St Etheldreda, Founder of Ely Cathedral (679 AD)

It's difficult to see her from this distance. But we can imagine the landscape in which she lived from what we know of living on the same ground. The hill of Ely stood above the flats just as it does now, but all around was marsh and water, and you had to know the causeways, full of bulrush and reed, loud with the peep and squawk of waterfowl. The channels were full of eel, then.

If you were to stand and look towards Ely hill from the tiny surrounding settlements, no stone miracle floated above the horizon, massive and ethereal by turns. Instead, frail dwellings like pimples dotted the mound. People gathered to live around the community as it prayed, so the Ely settlement grew outwards as the prayers went upwards to the heavens: the big sky often misty, always damp, sometimes wildly inhospitable in the bitter winds.

It must have been grim to pray on dark mornings, in the filthy clothes of winter, spluttering and coughing, malarial from the mosquito-ridden marsh. It was a world away from the court of Northumbria and the fair linen of royalty.

What made the plain life worth it? For what did she pray? – Etheldreda, to whom so many would turn in sickness for so many hundreds of years, longing for health, praying for the souls of the loved dead, for the healing of sons and daughters, fathers and mothers and siblings and cousins.

Did she pray for the healing of nations? Did she pray for the light to spring up in dark times? It was her vocation to join the joy of heaven to the hope and fears of the earth, living as she did on a damp mound between the water and the sky.

We pray on her ground now. It is drier than it was and surrounded by fields of wheat, green-gold and rippling like a princess's hair when the wind blows.

For what do *we* pray? For those we love and have lost for a little while, for the forgotten, for health, for the healing of sons and daughters, fathers and mothers and siblings and cousins.

For the healing of nations. For the light to spring up in dark times. For the hope of heaven to illuminate the choked and tangled ways of this earth. For space for the wheat to grow among the tares. For a future for the waterfowl and the big sky, for the

settlement of Ely and all its people, for the kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

Prayer for the Day

Lighten, we beseech thee, O merciful God, the hearts of thy faithful people; and by the example of thy servant Etheldreda teach us to seek the things which are above; through Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

2 July 2020

This was the last day the cathedral was closed.

Tomorrow the Cathedral will open its doors. It's busy again. The new conditions under which people will visit for private prayer are all drawn up and made ready; the plans are made for worship from the 12th; the clock has returned to the right hour. (There was a *Tom's Midnight Garden* moment yesterday when the clock struck twice within 10 minutes, as we finally emerged into British Summer Time.) The air in the nave is stirring with people cleaning and preparing. And all that is exciting.

At the same time, though, there's a preoccupied air to many of the exchanges I have with others, a sense that the common uniformity of our lives under lockdown is dissolving away under the different pressures which accompany our greater array of possibilities.

As more opens up, other things come to their close. This will be the last of these Reflections, as the time dissolves away in which they could be written, and the common conditions of our lives float apart. I am

really sad to see that space disappear.

I am very conscious that life is only opening up for some people – that a good many are still confined by the requirements of isolation, and may be feeling the more invisible because it's not shared by everyone else any more. Four months is already a very long time to be alone. It's hard to be toiling more alone than before, when before at least we were alone together. It seems terribly important that the demands of 'business' don't overtake the importance of mutual care.

The world that's opening up is staggering on its feet, too, with multiple uncertainties over the future, over what will happen next with the virus, with people's livelihoods, with all the ways in which we can and can't re-unite, both in worship and in ordinary life. with the difficult and incalculable assessments of risk which everyone has to make all the time for themselves and others, assessments which feel more like whistling in the dark than is at all comfortable.

All across the Scriptures there is one clear and present promise. It is almost the first thing God says to his chosen people, and the last thing Jesus says to his friends as sends them forward into the

rest of their lives.

It's 'I am with you.'

'The Lord be with you,' we say to each other as we meet for worship. 'The Lord be with you,' says the priest presiding at the Eucharist: 'Lift up your hearts!' 'Remember,' Jesus says upon the mountain as he is drawn towards our common heavenly home, 'I am with you, even to the end of the age.'

The psalmist, even deep in the midst of doubt and trouble and uncertainty, reaches for the certainty of God's presence. 'I am always with you,' he sings, 'You hold me by my right hand.'

That same promise is ours. Our invisible bonds with our invisible God hold us steady, and join us in ways we cannot see or understand. Seemingly separated, apparently scattered, we are still alone together.

Prayer for the Future

Fix thou our steps, O Lord, that we stagger not at the uneven motions of the world, but steadily go on to our glorious home; neither censuring our journey with the uneven weather we meet with, nor turning out of our way for anything which befalls us. The winds are often rough, and our own weight presses us downwards. Reach forth, O Lord, thy hand, thy

saving hand, and speedily deliver us. Teach us, O Lord, to use this transitory life as pilgrims returning to their beloved home; that we may take what our journey requires, and not think of settling in a foreign country.

John Wesley

The pictures for the Holy Week reflections are:

(Palm Sunday) A detail from Duccio di Buoninsegna, Christ's Entry into Jerusalem, from Maestà, 1311, Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana del Duomo, Siena (Public Domain)

(Holy Monday) 'Mary Magdalen anointing Christ's feet', c. 1503-4, unknown author, illumination on parchment, in the Vaux Passional, fol. 15v. National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth (Peniarth MC 482D)
Credit: National Library of Wales / CC0

(Holy Tuesday) A flowering cross from a Crucifixion mosaic in the apse of San Clemente, Rome
Credit: Rita1234 / CC. BY.SA 3.0

(Holy Wednesday) From Pieter Pourbus, The Last Supper, 1548, oil on panel. Groeninge Museum, Bruges
Credit: Vassil / CC0.1 Wikimedia Commons

(Maundy Thursday) From the Circle of the Master of the Amsterdam Death of the Virgin, The Last Supper, c.1485-1500, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (inv. no. SK-A-2129)
Photo: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam / Public Domain

(Good Friday) From Giotto di Bondone, The Arrest of Christ (Kiss of Judas), c. 1304-6, Cappella degli Scrovegni, Padua
Photo: Geoff Wren / CC-Public domain

(Easter Saturday) From Andrea Mantegna, Lamentation over the Dead Christ, c. 1483, tempera on canvas, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan (inv. 352)
Photo: © Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

(Easter Sunday) From Giotto di Bondone, Noli me tangere, c.

1304-6, fresco, Cappella degli Scrovegni, Padua
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