

Lift up your hearts



Mark Oakley writes

UNIVERSITIES, like everyone else, are trying to do their best in difficult times. I'm at home, and spend my time answering anxious emails or phone calls from students about whether to go home or stay; and about exams, research, or mental health during isolation. Some are self-isolating, and need food or a friendly face on Zoom. Three resources help me to stay sane: a picture, a poem, and a book.

Jacopo Bassano's painting *The Good Samaritan*, painted in about 1562 and now in the National Gallery, sets the parable in his own landscape (his home town can be seen in the distance). It is a story that interrupts your landscape and lodges itself alarmingly close to your own life.

In the painting, the Samaritan is using his energy to lift up the victim, ready to place him on the mule. There's great physicality in the painting. This isn't a pious bit of indifferent charity: this involves both muscle and money. If you're looking for a saint here, you're not going to find hands clasped in prayer, but sweat and a pulled nerve in the back.

The other thing that strikes me is how similar the men look: they could even be brothers. It's as if, when mercy is being shown to someone, we all become related again as human beings.

It cannot have been easy for the man who was helped. He had been brought up to believe that Samaritans were spiritual inferiors, to be avoided. You sense that, because of what happens here, when he wakes up in that inn — with a headache, a



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sore leg, and a bill paid for in advance — he is going to have to rethink much of what he has, until now, accepted as fact about the world. The mule is ready to begin quite a journey for this man. In the painting, light is literally on the horizon.

We spend so much time trying to make our lives fit our beliefs, but here the man has to let his beliefs be affected by his life, by his experience. At the moment, I think I'm in a similar place.

IN THE Saxon State library, Dresden, there is a small, ninth-century volume of St Paul's epistles, most probably transcribed by an Irish monk. It has the wonderful name now of *Codex Boernerianus*, and it was badly damaged by water during the Second World War.

It is still possible, however, to read a note — in Old Irish — that was written in the margins. In translation, it says: "Going to Rome Is a lot of hassle for little gain. You won't find the King you seek there, unless you bring him with you."

Recently, I have used this poem as a focus for prayer. I have been made aware of a disquieting fragility in my faith when I haven't got somewhere to go to and worship. Thrown back on my own company, in my enclosed living space, it is as if I've

EDWARD Lear's *Nonsense Songs* (1870) help our imaginations to escape and to find something of ourselves at the same time. They remind us of beauty, love, and adventure — just what I need at the moment. We find non-human pairs or groups taking off on a journey. The Owl and the Pussy-Cat go to sea in a beautiful pea-green boat; the Duck and Kangaroo hop around the world; and even a nutcracker and some tongs, a table and a chair, go out to take the air. You sense the wanderer in Lear, and, at their happiest, these describe a joyful togetherness that he, sadly, never attained. Read them out loud and enjoy the words.

Here's the end of "The Jumblies":

And in twenty years they all came back,
In twenty years or more,
And every one said, "How tall they've grown!"
For they've been to the Lakes, and the
Torrible Zone,
And the hills of the Chankly Bore;
And they drank their health, and gave them a feast
Of dumplings made of beautiful yeast;
And everyone said, "If we only live,
We too will go to sea in a Sieve —
To the hills of the Chankly Bore!"
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

been asked to learn again something of my first love for God; to see who we both are when we're alone together, far away from churchy chatter, vestry irony, and my liturgical autopilot system.

R.S. Thomas knew that we were created by "such a fast God, always before us and Leaving as we arrive". And yet, in these times, I feel that the distance has lessened, and, although disorientated, I'm starting to appreciate this as a present (the meanings

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of that word beautifully joined) rather than a problem to be solved. The silence at home feels like God's last resort against all my nonsense.

UNSURPRISINGLY, the biblical text that has become important to me lately is Matthew 6.6: "Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

As I'm spending more time walking alone, or sitting in the garden, I'm also drawing on the calming poems of Mary Oliver. She helps me to see the world again, and her work embodies the lesson that Thoreau learned in his wood cabin: "We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids but by an infinite expectation of the dawn."

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BOOK: The Collected Poems of W. H. Auden for its encyclopaedic resonance and seriousness about the human soul.
FILM: When needing hope, I always watch films about courageous resistance to oppressive regimes, such as *Anthropoid*, *Alone in Berlin*, and *Sophie Scholl: The final days*.
MUSIC: My isolation track is what I would also take to a desert island: the haunting voice of Nina Simone, singing "I wish I knew how it would feel to be free."

Cloistered in cloister

Grant Bayliss, Diocesan Canon Precentor at Christ Church, Oxford, has a cathedral on his doorstep. How does he feel about staying at home?

MANY of my old students will remember me going on (and on, and on) in sacraments classes that "matter matters", and, to misquote Thomas Aquinas: "We can't hope to understand anything with our minds that we haven't grasped with our physical senses first."

So what do I do when the matter has been taken away? When I can't touch the blessed bread or taste the wine?

Well, this Sunday, I'll be making a spiritual communion. It's an old idea that was important in the medieval Church and has often got a little lost or confused. But even when the Reformers rewrote our service books to bring back all the tasting and the touching, restoring the breaking of real bread and the sharing of a common cup to the people, it found a home in the new Anglican theology of Cranmer's 1549 Prayer Book.

At the end of his service for "the Order for



CHRIST CHURCH OXFORD

Visitation of the Sick and the Communion of the Same", he wrote:

But yf any man eyther by reason of extremitie of sicknesse, or for lacke of warnyng geven in due tyme, to the curate, or by any other just impedimente, doe not receyve the sacramente of Christes bodye and bloud then the curate shall instruct hym, that yf he doe truely repent hym of his synnes and stedfastly beleve that Jesus Christ hath suffered death upon the crosse for hym, and shed his bloud for his redempcion, earnestly remembring the benefites he hath therby, and geving hym hertie thanks therfore; he doeth eate and drynke spiritually the bodye and bloud of our savioure Christe, profitably to his soules

helth, although he doe not receyve the sacrament with his mouth.

And there it has stayed through all the editions ever since: a little disclaimer. . . God chooses sacraments like the eucharist to meet us, but he never said he would only meet us there, only love us if we physically ate, only bless us if we literally drank.

Cloistered up in Cloister House as a precautionary measure to protect my wife, I can't claim "extremitie of sicknesse"; but there is another "just impedimente" that means not just I but almost all of us cannot receive the sacrament of Christ's body and blood. . .

But I will watch and I will pray. I will repent me of my sins and steadfastly believe that Jesus Christ has suffered death upon the cross for me, for you, for the whole world. I will remember Christ's benefites to me and give hearty thanks. . . And be reassured . . . that I am eating and drinking spiritually the body and blood of our Saviour Christ, profitably to my soul's health, although I do not receive the sacrament with my mouth.

Wherever you are this Sunday and whatever you do, while our churches are shut and so many self-isolating, may you know God's love, his presence and his peace.

Anthony Priddis, the former Bishop of Hereford, recalls a booklet written by Mother Mary Clare SLG: Aloneness not Loneliness:

That theme has always been vital, but now it takes on a heightened significance for our times. We are witnessing many people discover the truth about which Mother Mary Clare wrote. It is helped by all the opportunities that social media provide, but it needs the disposition of the heart to want to reach out to others, to know that we are made for relationship, not for being isolated and lonely.

The perspective of being alone, of physical rather than social distancing, heightens our awareness of the need for relating, for caring as well as being cared for, and this, it seems to me, is what we are seeing across our nation at the moment.

We are seeing a shift back from "I" to "We". Wouldn't it be marvellous if that shift proved vastly stronger than Covid-19, and so shaped the next years of our society?