

Lift up your hearts



Tom Clammer continues our series

AS I write this, I have just been informed that my period of shielding is over. This does not bring with it immediate freedom — I am now told that I need to exercise “stringent social distancing” — but it is a useful milepost on the way to a life that might look a little more familiar.

I retired from full-time ministry at the beginning of 2019, owing to the onset of multiple sclerosis, and have found myself among the cohort of the “extremely clinically vulnerable”, confined to our homes since March.

It might seem extraordinarily contrary of me to turn to Caravaggio’s painting *Supper at Emmaus* (1601) (right) during a period when the vast majority of Christians have been experiencing a eucharistic famine, but I have looked at it several times over the past few weeks. The experience of the past three months has forced us to ask questions of our doctrine and ecclesiology of the eucharist which probably haven’t troubled us for the past century.

Caravaggio’s depiction of the sheer astonishment and wonder of the two disciples as their eyes are opened and they recognise their Lord is so kinetic and motive that I find myself hoping that, perhaps, when we meet Christ in the sacrament again, something of that initial surprise and awe might be part of the experience. I wonder when was the last time I flung my arms wide, or pushed myself up out of my chair in astonishment at the presence of God?



PHOTOS ALAMY

ALL of the **Easter collects** have struck me with a potency that has probably been lacking over the past few years. As we have prayed our way through Eastertide, with all of its images of stones rolled aside and iron gates burst open, one of the gifts of the liturgy has been to force me to think a bit harder about the language that we use of freedom. Probably the most striking collect is the additional option for the Second Sunday of Easter:

Risen Christ,
for whom no door is locked, no
entrance barred:
open the doors of our hearts,
that we may seek the good of
others
and walk the joyful road of
sacrifice and peace,
to the praise of God the Father.

To think of the road of sacrifice as “joyful” is not a new idea, but it’s a phrase that we can bounce over in “normal” times. Having a little extra time to pray, reflect, and contemplate (when not too distracted by jigsaws . . .) has led me to wonder whether I have been attentive enough to whether the door of my heart is open. Retirement has turned out to be very full and active, and I have spent a lot of time thinking about the doors of my house and

of my diary. With both of those forcibly shut for a season, the rather more important door of my heart has risen in prominence, which is probably no bad thing.

ONE of the most striking losses of the lockdown has been the falling silent of our cathedral and parish choirs. Seven years as a precentor have marinated me in the psalms, and I found myself hunting for them on CDs and search engines.

The biblical sequence of **Psalms for the Ninth Evening** has long been my favourite section of the psalter, and, when I was in cathedral ministry, I would long for the ninth evening to roll around. Psalms 47, 48, and 49 — particularly when sung respectively to the Anglican chants of Barnby, Macpherson and Gray, and Walmisley — seem to offer the entire Psalter distilled into three brief scripture passages.

Psalm 47 is one of sheer joy: “O clap your hands together, all ye people: O sing unto God with the voice of melody.” That is immediately followed by Psalm 48, with its confidence in the steadfastness and presence of God, and its call on us to “wait for thy loving-kindness, O God: in the midst of thy temple”.

The final psalm of the triad, 49, is heart-breakingly beautiful, particularly in the

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combination of the Prayer Book's Coverdale text and Walmisley's chant. It firmly reminds us not to fall into the trap of placing ourselves at the centre of the world, and when we stumble into arrogance we are rebuked; "for he shall carry nothing away with him when he dieth: neither shall his pomp follow him". I need to hear this message fairly regularly.

OVER the lockdown, it has been noted several times — on social media, as well as in the religious press — that the monastic communities might well have some useful things to teach us.

I've been **reading** Cunningham's *Thomas Merton: Spiritual master* (Paulist Press, 1992), in which are collected what are generally considered to be the most influential and important of Merton's vol-uminous writings.

Striking throughout the work is the way in which an enclosed, eremitic monk who has actively chosen a cloistered life has such an expansive and joyful vision of God's

freedom. Again, it speaks into our current situation, but echoes far beyond it.

Merton's theology and spirituality change and develop over time, but never far away is this almost childlike vision of God at play within his creation: "What is serious to men is often very trivial in the sight of God. What in God might appear to us as 'play' is perhaps what He Himself takes most seriously. At any rate the Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance. We do not have to go very far to catch echoes of that game, and all that dancing. . .

"No despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not.

"Yet the fact remains that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our

awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance" — from "The General Dance", first published in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962).

LEST all that make it appear that I am far too religious for my own good, throughout lockdown I have also been ravenously **re-reading** Terry Pratchett.

If you haven't read him for a while, do go back. If you have never read him, start pretty much anywhere, and I doubt you will regret it. Perhaps begin with *Guards! Guards!* Rarely does an author deflate the pomposity of authority structures in a way that is at once generous, cutting, and hilarious.

Canon Tom Clammer is a freelance theological educator, theologian, and spiritual director. He lives in Salisbury, exercises regular parish ministry in the dioceses of Gloucester and Salisbury, and is on the pastoral team at St Paul's Cathedral.

Next week: Mark Williams

Great Rejoicings

ALTHOUGH this year marks the 150th anniversary of the diary started by Francis Kilvert, the following extracts come from that other well-known clerical diarist, the Revd James Woodforde, Rector of Weston Longeville near Norwich, from 1774 to 1803. On 3 January 1772, Woodforde is called to the Manor House to baptise Charlotte Custance, born on Christmas Day. . .

POOR Mrs Custance still extremely ill, not able to move. Mr Custance most unhappy abt it tho' Mr Martineau [the doctor] says, he sees no danger. Pray God Almighty restore her to her former Health soon, is the earnest Prayers and Wishes of her many many Friends, particularly to her dearest Friend and deservedly so, my much ever respected Squire, Mr Custance. It is my daily, Morning and Evening Prayer, that she might get over it and that soon. . . Dinner today boiled Beef.

6 January: Sent Briton [a servant] to Weston House again this Morn' brought me bad News of poor Mrs Custance, that she had had a very bad Night, and all very uneasy about her at Weston-House. Pray God Almighty bless the means that are made use of for her Recovery and preserve her. . . Her



The Visit, a domestic scene by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806)

Months, owing it is supposed to some violent strain in the back-bone on Child-bearing. In every other respect very well, can eat and drink heartily and now in tolerable good Spirits.

26 April: We dined and spent the Afternoon at Weston-House. . . Mrs Custance being finely

present distressed Situation makes me very unhappy, as she has been so kind to us.

14 January: Mrs Custance still continues getting better. . . The most severe Frost last night and this Morning as ever I felt. . . The Water above Stairs in the Basons froze in a few Minutes after being put there this Morn'.

3 February: Took a Walk this Morning to Weston-House stayed better than half an Hour there and then returned home to Dinner. Mrs Custance still confined to her bed and as helpless as ever, quite lame of one Side, in every other respect tolerably well.

15 February: Mrs Custance sent her Coach and four after Nancy [Woodforde's wife] this morning to spend an Hour with her in her Room. . . She found Mrs Custance better than she expected but nevertheless so bad as to unable to move herself in bed or likely to do so perhaps for the next two

drank Tea with us, she looks very well considering her long Confinement. Tho' she is now able to sit up in a Chair, yet she cannot walk a step without great Assistance. This is the first time I have seen her for the last four Months.

30 May: Great Rejoicings at Weston House &c. Bells ringing. Guns-firing &c. Account of Mrs Custance coming down Stairs for the first time for the last 5 Months. I gave my People on the Occasion a bottle of Gin to drink this Evening in Kitchen. I am most heartily glad that Mrs Custance is so much recovered, hope she wont make too free. Dinner today boiled chicken and Oyster Sauce, a Pigs Face, cold Lion of Veal roasted &c.

From The Diary of a Country Parson, selected by David Hughes (1992).