

Lift up your hearts

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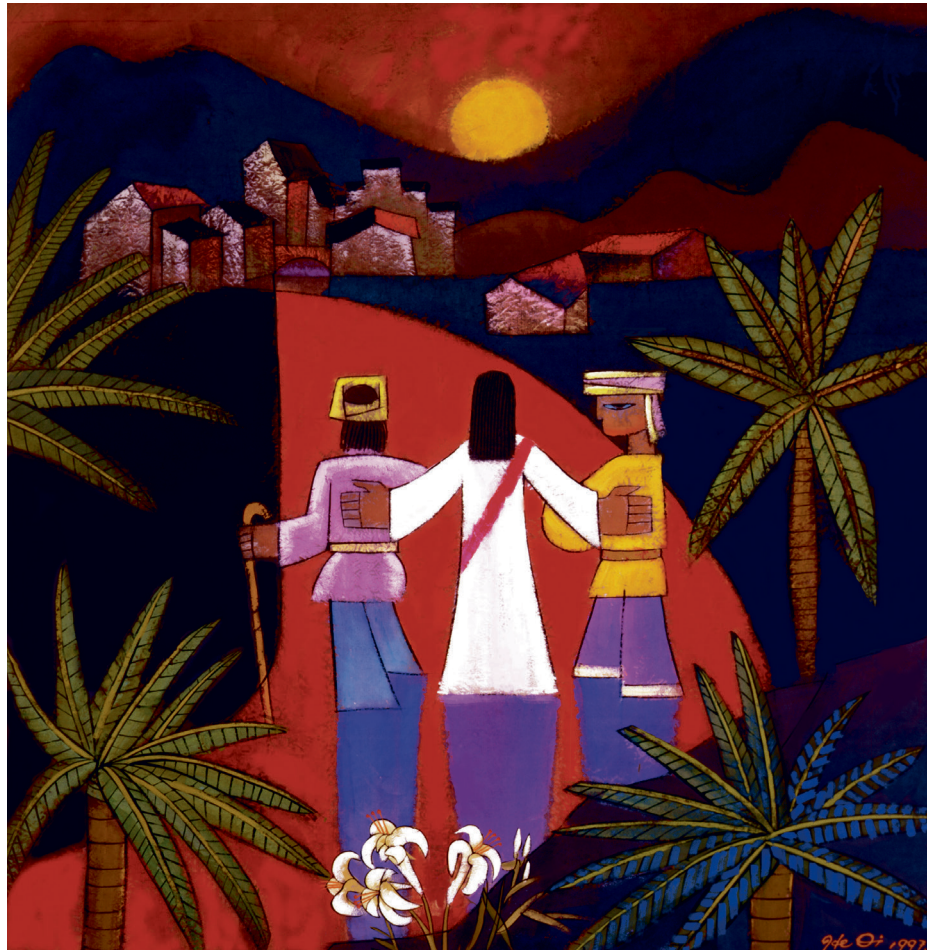
Margaret Sentamu
continues our series

COVID-19 aside, right now I am in the midst of preparing for retirement — stepping down from certain roles to take up new ones, and moving house to a different part of the country. Common themes of loss, sorrow, pain, and transition — all without the opportunity to say goodbye. So how do I approach this — psychologically, practically, and spiritually?

In her book *Praying our Goodbyes*, Joyce Rupp writes: “Unless we say our goodbyes we are not truly free to say our hellos. . . The need to let go before we can truly move on is most important. . . For the Christian, hello always follows goodbye in some form if we allow it.”

I remember, when my husband and I left Uganda for the UK in the midst of Idi Amin’s brutal regime, my family insisted on our having a farewell meal together. It was a simple and undramatic way of blessing us as we took this new step into another country. Those family bonds of breaking bread together enabled us to welcome a new beginning.

These present times of change, transition, and loss are also times of opportunity for us. Covid-19 is robbing many people of their “threshold” rituals: leaving school, graduation, changing jobs, losing loved ones without being able to attend their funerals. How do we approach such times? How do we mark the departure from one stage as we move to the next? We all cope with change and loss in different ways, but — whichever way we do it — we must recognise the pain and not take short cuts through the grief process.



When I stepped down recently from six years’ service on the board of a mental-health trust, my colleagues planned a meal at a restaurant in Leeds to mark my departure. Instead, the flowers and cards came through the post, and the farewell speeches had to be done down the line. It was hard to feel the sense of closure that comes from a good ending.

MY PICTURE is *The Road to Emmaus* by He Qi, because the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, in St Luke’s Gospel (Luke 24.13-35), is a powerful illustration of this movement of change. Rupp identifies four stages in the disciples’ journey:

First, recognition: “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” We begin by identifying our loss. We name our experience of hurt or pain. In his book *The Shape of Living*, David Ford says that we respond best to those

things that overwhelm us by “Naming it; Describing it; and Attending to that which overwhelms us.” “Naming” the goodbye may add to our pain, but it is a necessary first step.

Second, reflection: “But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place”. We need to take time to slow down and to reflect on our loss. In a Western culture where keeping busy has become a badge of honour, we lose out on the simplicity of sitting and waiting in darkness for God’s peace to come to us. Two years ago, when we experienced bereavement in our family, we learnt the painful lesson that you cannot hurry grief. It needs our full attention. As Rupp says, “We sit with it, look at it, face it, even though it grieves us to do so.”

Third, ritualisation: “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and

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Continued from previous page

broke it, and gave it to them". For Rupp, "ritualisation" means the use of images or symbols which enable us to act out our pain, connecting our life experience to the dynamic of prayer experience. For the two disciples, the ritual of breaking bread awoke them from their confusion and misery, and helped them to see more clearly. For me, all the practical tasks of a move — decluttering, packing, preparing new address information, handing over tasks — are part of the rituals that I use in reflection. As I pick up each piece of paper, each old mug, each picture that holds memories, I try to use that as a moment of prayer and thanksgiving.

Fourth, reorientating: "They said to each other: 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'" As the connection is made between our pain and loss, and the God of healing and

strength, we find a greater freedom to let go and continue our journey. As we move into reorientation, the fragments of our lives begin to come together, and life starts to make sense again. As Rupp says, "When we learn to say goodbye, we truly learn to say to ourselves and to others: 'Go, God be with you.'"

AS FOR **music**, *Thula Sizwe* speaks to me powerfully — a South African song of lament, born of a longing for freedom from apartheid.

ZULU:

*Thula Sizwe, ungabokhala
uJahova wakho uzokunqobela
Inkululeko, Inkululeko!
uJahova wakho uzokunqobela*

ENGLISH:

Be still nation, don't cry
Your Jehovah will conquer for
you

Freedom, freedom!

Your Jehovah will conquer for
you

This song of hope and reassurance helps me to work through my own fears and struggles, connecting me with those around the world who are still suffering bondage, oppression, or discrimination.

Finally, my go-to **film** is *The Shawshank Redemption*, the story of Andy Dufresne, who, through patience and perseverance in the face of injustice, discovers that, in the darkest times, it is important to remain true to yourself, find the will and courage to fight back, and even to enjoy the journey.

The Revd Margaret Sentamu is an Assistant Curate of St Chad's, Knavesmire, shortly to move to the diocese of Newcastle. Her husband retires as Archbishop of York on 8 June.

Next week: Roger Wagner

It's OK not to be OK

THE emphasis might have changed, but the main anti-coronavirus message is still to stay at home whenever possible. This is especially true for people over 70 and/or with vulnerable health, parents of small children, and people who can work from home or who need to use public transport to get to work — in other words, the majority.

For many, the relaxation of the rules covering outdoor activity has led to greater anxiety levels, as parks and recreation areas fill up unpredictably.

Mental Health Awareness Week this year focuses on kindness. One of the greatest acts of kindness is to allow friends and relatives to talk openly about their mental fragility. Perhaps one of few good things to come out of such a time is that feelings of anxiety can be spoken of openly.

As the energy and resolve that accompanied the start of the pandemic falters, the need for resilience has become clear. *Justine Allain Chapman* has produced an illustrated A-Z on the subject, which can be found on the *Church Times* website.

Here is the entry for O:

I HAVE struggled to find a balance between being a responsible citizen aware of the issues our world is facing, and getting so overwhelmed by bad news and death tolls



that my hope is eroded. Even though I limit the amount of time I listen to the news or look at a screen, and seek to give time to opening myself to what is life-giving, there are times when it's just too sad, or I am upset and angry. I have learned that it is OK not to be OK. Indeed, not being OK is the reasonable, natural, and compassionate response to what is going on.

It can be difficult to say it, though.

There's a judgement call to be made regarding what and how much you reveal about yourself, and to whom. Society seems to say that you should always be happy, and that being sad or showing sadness is a sign of weakness. Being human involves the full range of emotional responses. Being resilient involves acknowledging what you're

having to cope with, what threatens you, as the first step to facing it and growing through the experience.

I am reminded of the prophet Elijah. He was capable, reliant on God, but otherwise pretty self-sufficient and successful. He'd challenged the false prophets of Baal, won the contest, and then had to flee from the evil Queen Jezebel. But then he wasn't OK. Languishing in the desert, he feared for his life, felt his life was worthless, and wanted to die. Exhausted, he slept, and an angel visited him, fed him, and let him sleep (1 Kings 19).

Since Elijah was unused to being on the back foot, he was very keen to tell God about all the good things that he'd been doing, and how hard life was for him. God's response was to give him some time safely tucked away in a cave and teach him to honour silence.

Elijah was too fired up, looking for God in the drama of earthquakes, wind, and fire. It took him a while to realise that God was to be found within, in a silence from which wisdom could emerge. For Elijah, that meant securing a new political leader, and someone, Elisha, to train up and eventually take over from him.

It is OK not to be OK, even — perhaps, especially — if you are unused to acknowledging the feeling. Sleep, nourishment, some cave time, and facing what is tough, not in the drama of it, but in a calm quietness, are necessary steps to honouring where you are at. You may well find the support of an angel or two, and, later, insights that bring wisdom, purpose, and a future.