

# Cries from the Crisis

*Poems of faith from the Covid-19 Pandemic*



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2020



*At home* (19.3.20)

To be 'at home'  
used to mean  
a social gathering,  
inviting round one's friends  
for drinks and chatter.  
Now the coronavirus  
gives it a new meaning—  
self-isolation, not a pretty word.  
But it is an opportunity  
to be 'at home' in oneself,  
to find that place of unity  
in which one is at peace  
with the living God  
and quietly in communion  
with other isolated people.  
Instead of panic  
breathe in this singing silence,  
imagine the one breath  
that keeps us all alive,  
and know that you are loved  
and will be always,  
even if your breathing should cease.

*Spring* (20.3.20)

The forsythia's ablaze with yellow  
and the magnolia is fully out.  
In Gypsy Lane the cherry blossom  
has been pink for ages,  
and the plum trees are in leaf next door.  
Daffodils—well, they came in early February  
and the snowdrops well before them—  
all this colour waking early  
despite the storms. Strange how  
the world outside is made more important  
when you're stuck indoors, looking out.  
A blink of sun today lit up the Close  
before the clouds returned to lowering grey  
and more rain threatened. Nature  
changes as our moods do  
and spring is on the horizon,  
just behind the dark of Holy Week.  
Let its colour and its fragrance cheer us,  
cooped up in the house,  
that we may rise as the Lord does  
into joyful resurrection.

*Union* (22.3.20)

How strange to be  
locked out of church  
on a Sunday morning.  
Even with virtual worship  
it's a serious miss.  
But just because  
we're not in church  
it doesn't mean  
that God is absent.  
The suffering Christ  
is really closer to us  
than ever. If only  
we can enter  
that place deep within us  
in which we are all one  
and all *the* one for whom  
he died, our eyes  
can be opened  
and we will find ourselves  
truly united.

*Annunciation* (25.3.2020)

We are all the prisoners  
of uncertainty,  
that churning in the guts,  
but this is nothing  
compared with what  
Mary must have felt  
confronted by an angel  
with news of revolution  
in her life.

To find the 'yes'  
within herself  
must have taken  
such courage,  
such trust in God,  
and yet she said it,  
opening up the way  
to our salvation  
if only we will say  
'let it be according to your will'.

*Great love* (27.3.20)

You who spend your lives  
saving the lives of others—  
we salute you;  
you take risks every day  
to do the right thing—  
we applaud you.

And you who suffer loneliness  
as you lie struggling to breathe  
in hospital, unvisited—  
we embrace you from afar.

May God give strength and comfort  
where each is needed  
as the invisible enemy strikes  
or as isolation grips the mind;  
may solace be available  
to all who suffer.

For the sake of the love  
that is there  
even when we cannot know it,  
unfailing, unconditional, and free.

*Enough* (28.3.20)

Are you sick, Mother Earth?  
Sick of exploitation,  
sick of all the rubbish  
and the pain?  
An unjust world  
created by your 'stewards'  
that feeds on scarce resources,  
borrowed time?  
I cannot forget  
the pictures that I saw  
of young boys  
scrabbling up a mountain  
of other people's rubbish,  
searching for food  
or anything to sell.  
And when our crazy world  
returns to 'normal',  
let me not forget  
those pictures then.  
If each of us remembered  
to refuse such waste  
(pun definitely intended),  
such culpable injustice,  
you could thrive again, Mother Earth,  
and all could have enough.  
May God have mercy on us  
and grant us the time,  
the will, the courage  
for amendment of life  
when this pestilence is over  
and we can start again.



*Sunday prayer* (29–30.3.20)

Another Sunday without a trip to church.  
It still feels strange  
and probably will for some time yet.  
Virtual worship is proliferating  
but, even with this,  
it isn't at all the same.  
How lucky we are, though,  
having this technology  
and time and space to use it.  
Think of the people  
who are *really* isolated—  
the ones on their own  
without friends or family,  
unable to get out  
for their food and medicine.  
Think of the ones  
who live in cramped conditions  
with many children  
and maybe a spouse  
who is violent or abusive.  
Do not just think, but pray.

*Readiness* (31.3.20; based on John 11: 54)

Just after Lazarus was raised  
and the authorities  
plotted to kill Jesus,  
he secluded himself from them  
with the disciples.

He did not go out in public  
as the Passover approached,  
but readied himself and them  
for what would happen.

Are we using this time  
of our own seclusion  
to be ready for

whatever shall happen,

to confirm our trust

and faith in God,

knowing that we

and our loved ones

will be held

not just here

but in eternity?

Underneath are the

everlasting arms.

*Promises* (1-2.4.20)

Once more on morning news they speak  
of medics' poor protection,  
working on without the gear  
then falling to infection;  
of firms that struggle to survive  
without the promised grants;  
of testing kits that don't appear  
and many more complaints.

But the country is trying  
to get the best job done  
by working on around the clock  
or staying safe at home.

And however bad the news may be  
we have our loving God  
whose promises will never fail  
whose grace is kind and good.  
We have a powerful vision  
of new life, a new earth.  
These things will not leave us bereft  
but bring us to new birth.

So don't rely on earthly things  
for spiritual protection;  
our Lord will soon arise again  
and we'll have resurrection!

*Belief* (4.4.20)

How should we pray?  
It all depends whether God  
will intervene to take this virus from us  
or walk beside us as we bear it.  
Personally I believe the latter  
and so I pray for faith and strength.  
Christ showed God's love  
as he proved that even the worst things  
that could happen to him  
could not overcome the good.  
He showed that love is always,  
always stronger than death  
and good than evil.  
So shall we know this love  
in our hearts, carrying our burden,  
and, as we hold out to the end,  
everlasting life.

*Palm Sunday* (5.4.20)

I have a whole pot full of palm crosses  
collected over many years, but today  
there is no one to wave them but me.  
Once again we come to Sunday,  
but instead of going to church  
we sit at home, at our computer screens.  
No procession, no donkey, no cheering children  
on this Palm Sunday, but the silence  
that has become my natural companion,  
the silence in which every breath  
brings me closer to someone fighting  
for breath, or someone for whom  
the quiet is new, uncomfortable, mournful.  
Perhaps it is someone  
who had no chance to say goodbye,  
no funeral to bring closure.

How cruel this virus is, crucifying love.

And so we embark upon Holy Week  
and watch as Jesus descends  
from the Mount of Olives  
to great acclaim. But Love will be  
crucified here too on Friday,  
the cries of Hosanna silenced  
and waving palms replaced by  
shaking fists. Yet still Love will  
vanquish death, for love never ends,  
and although there are few  
mourners at the cross,  
few witnesses in the garden,

the silence will be  
shot through with wonder  
and a shout will go up as our King  
comes to reign again.

*Monday of Holy Week (6.4.20)*

The tree outside my bedroom window—  
the one I call my green cathedral—  
isn't in leaf yet, but this morning  
when I opened the curtains  
it was twinkling with sunlight  
as the ivy growing on it  
moved in the breeze.

The birds were busy there already  
and both the sight and sound  
were cheering. Today Jesus walks  
into the Temple in Jerusalem to find  
the bird-sellers busy at their trade  
and their business doesn't cheer him,  
not at all. We see the angry Jesus  
knock over the money-changers' tables  
and hear him condemn them  
for turning his Father's house  
into a den of thieves. Sadly  
the thieves and scammers of our day  
are taking advantage of the vulnerable,  
offering to do good things for them  
and then running off with their money.  
It is despicable behaviour.  
But we can know that God  
genuinely wants good things for us—  
even the thieves and scammers—  
and this is why Jesus was nailed to a tree.  
As he starts his journey  
through this portentous week  
may we journey with him and see  
how the tree of execution  
becomes the tree of life.

*Authority* (7.4.20—Tuesday of Holy Week)

Our Prime Minister  
is in intensive care  
with the coronavirus  
and has handed over  
the reins of power,  
at least for now.  
May he be able to rest  
and recover. The same goes  
for all the thousands of others  
here and across the world  
who lie in hospital beds  
or on ventilators.

On the Tuesday of Holy Week  
Jesus was asked  
on whose authority  
he taught and healed.  
And the Pharisees  
were incredulous  
when he declared  
that the marginalized  
would enter the Kingdom  
before them.

Those who suffer  
most at the moment  
are, once again, the poor  
and the outcast—  
Rohingyas in their camps  
and displaced Syrians in theirs,  
people in countries with little healthcare.  
And yet the authorities



in the rich world  
still oppress them with their debt.

When our Prime Minister recovers  
may he understand  
where the real authority lies—  
with God—  
and act to right this injustice  
for those with no intensive care.

*Precious ointment* (8.4.20—Wednesday of Holy Week)

In today's reading  
a bottle of precious ointment  
was broken and poured  
over Jesus's head  
by a young woman  
whose name we will  
never know.

Judas objected, saying that  
it could have been sold  
and the money given  
to the poor.

But Jesus defended the woman  
for anointing his body  
for burial, and said,  
'The poor you have always with you,  
but you will not always have me.'

The good news for us  
is that, because he died  
and rose again,  
our Lord is always with us  
if only we will believe.

But the poor too we still  
have always with us.  
In these days of coronavirus  
perhaps the most sought-after liquid  
is hand or surface sanitizer  
but the poor have none,  
no clean water either,  
and live in crowded conditions  
where disease spreads rapidly.  
Let us not be so focused

on our own problems  
that we forget the poor,  
for they are especially  
precious to Jesus  
and he died for them too.

*Maundy Thursday* (9.4.20)

Thirty pieces of silver.  
That's all it took  
for Judas to betray Jesus.  
Thirty pieces of silver.  
From that moment onwards  
they were always on the lookout  
for an opportunity  
to hand him over  
to the authorities.

And Jesus knew  
he would be betrayed  
as he kneeled at Judas's feet  
and gently washed them.

How often have I weighed up  
mere money against my Lord's will;  
how many pieces of silver  
is my price? And yet  
still he meekly comes  
to kneel before me,  
bearing the towel.  
And then he offers me his body  
and his blood.

*Last words* (10.4.20—Good Friday)

Now the darkest day,  
but with the promise  
of the light returning.  
For three hours  
Jesus hangs on the cross  
as his chest slowly compresses  
and breathing becomes difficult.  
Where have we heard that  
over and over these dark days  
of the virus? All around us  
thousands are dying  
as their lungs fail,  
the ventilators finally  
not able to sustain life.  
And many of these die alone,  
without their loved ones,  
not abandoned by their carers  
but more isolated than we are,  
sheltering in our homes.

Do they hear the cry  
of Jesus on the cross:  
'My God, my God, why  
have you forsaken me?'  
If they do, I pray  
that Jesus's last words  
in Luke's Gospel  
inspire them with hope.  
First he assures the good thief,  
'Truly I tell you,  
today you will be with me  
in Paradise.' And then, as he dies,

'Father, into your hands  
I commend my spirit.'  
We commit the spirits  
of all those we have loved  
and lost into your gracious  
care, O Lord, and believe  
that in Jesus they will inherit  
everlasting life.

*Protection* (11.4.20—Holy Saturday)

Still the protective clothing  
isn't reaching all the medics  
and nineteen NHS workers  
have lost their lives.

But all the essential staff  
go on going in to work,  
risking infection  
even though they're scared.

Jesus lies in the tomb  
in his winding sheet  
but this is no protection  
for the disciples' fear.

Despair might be a better word—  
to know that they had let him down  
or, worse, denied him,  
while the women and John alone held firm.

What will happen now?  
They hide behind barred doors,  
nursing their regrets,  
as the shroud shifts and unravels  
and the Spirit moves the body.  
This doesn't help the disciples,  
for they do not know it.  
The cold, hard stone remains.

Adam and Eve, though,  
and Dismas the penitent thief,  
are witnesses to its shattering  
as Jesus pulls them physically  
out of all their torment.  
'Today you will be with me in Paradise.'  
These words are coming true for them  
as Love harrows hell, sin, and death.

*Easter Day* (12.4.20)

The death toll here  
reaches ten thousand  
on the very day  
that we celebrate  
the Resurrection.  
What an odd Easter  
it has been—  
probably one that  
all of us who survive  
will remember always.  
What will we tell  
our children's children  
about this day, when  
our churches were closed  
and we couldn't be  
in each other's company?  
We will tell them  
of the ingenuity with which  
everyone kept the feast—  
from the Archbishop of Canterbury  
broadcasting from his kitchen  
to my friend the organist,  
who managed to be playing  
in two different places at once  
as his recording was shared.  
And this all points  
to the strength of the human spirit  
which, in its turn,  
bears witness to the Holy Spirit,  
assuring us that, yes,  
death happens—  
it will happen to all of us  
in the end—



and there will be  
smaller and greater deaths  
along the way—  
but because Christ is risen  
his (and our) suffering  
is not the end, but only  
'the end of the beginning'.  
And what a new beginning  
we shall see! Alleluia!

*Bank holiday* (13.4.20)

An Easter bank holiday Monday  
unlike any other we have known,  
with people mostly obeying  
the instruction to stay at home  
and avoid contact with anyone  
outside one's immediate household.

Like bees in a hive we each  
keep to our own cells,  
but whereas they can fly off  
in search of pollen,  
we have to stay put.

And beekeepers' suits  
are apparently in demand  
as makeshift protective gowns,  
the better to shield the wearer  
from the sting  
of the coronavirus.

Balance against that  
the honey, the sweetness  
of yesterday's good news,  
the life that is stronger even than death  
and there is so much  
to be thankful for.

*Hope* (14.4.20)

Other countries are starting to lift the lockdown,  
and our media are clamouring for the same.  
But the medical and scientific advisers  
say it is way too early yet even to think about it.  
The dreaded peak in infections has not arrived yet  
and even once it does there will be a lag  
as the death toll continues to rise.  
On the news today were reports that  
olive trees throughout southern Europe  
are dying, victims, like us, of a new pathogen.  
And in Africa the plague of locusts  
has already wiped out whole countries' harvests.  
And so today I pray for Italy and Africa,  
where it must seem the Apocalypse is coming.  
But Jesus said to hold out to the end,  
and even now prepares breakfast for his friends.  
So let us love one another and hope in him,  
knowing that he is alive and is always with us.

*Care* (15.4.20)

It's racing through the care homes now,  
many hundreds dead already  
and the virus spreading fast.  
The old and frail fall victim first,  
but in a close community  
anyone can catch it, carers included.  
And now we know the numbers  
to add to the hospital deaths,  
the total is frightening. Are we to  
lose most of our wise, older generation?  
Help us, Lord, to cope with change,  
and comfort the families left behind.  
Give us all courage in this time of need  
and let us remember the words of Jesus:  
'I am with you always,  
even to the end of the age.'

*Three more weeks* (17.4.20)

The lockdown's been extended here  
for another three weeks  
and for many this will be bad news:  
the ones cooped up in city flats  
without a green space to look at;  
those struggling to feed their families,  
the lonely, the poor, and the isolated;  
the bored and the depressed or anxious.  
Then there are those whose operations  
have been postponed, whose house moves  
are on hold, or whose businesses are ruined.  
(I read of one woman for whom all three  
of these misfortunes had happened.)  
But I have to admit that I welcome  
another three weeks at home,  
where the depth of silent minutes  
allows a fuller appreciation  
of beauty, of birdsong, and of peace,  
where prayer can be fully entered into  
and my senses filled, like Peter's  
on the Galilean beach,  
with the thrill of the risen Jesus  
and the assurance of his purpose for us all.

*'Low' Sunday* (19.4.20)

To see another human face,  
not just on a computer screen  
(although that's a blessing),  
but actually there, in front of us.  
To touch another human hand  
or hug a loved one physically,  
these are things we miss in lockdown.  
Today I pray for the sheltered ones  
barely half-way through their sentence  
of three months shut away from others  
for fear of the coronavirus;  
that they might know the presence  
of our Saviour Jesus saying 'Peace be with you'.  
The disciples cowered in a locked room  
for fear of persecution; bewildered, anxious,  
frightened of the uncertain future.  
Jesus came to them with his Shalom,  
a real presence, flesh and blood and eating fish.  
As so often, he told them 'Be not afraid!'  
Let us treasure those words,  
the reassurance and the Shalom,  
and know him with us in our isolation.

*All we can* (22.4.20)

In a Nairobi slum I read about  
there was just one toilet for fifty families,  
no clean water and barely any soap.  
How can the virus be fought in these conditions,  
how can the sick be cared for?  
The people are crowded together,  
sharing a shack with many others,  
and the health-care system simply isn't there.  
And yet we grumble about shortages in our shops.  
We are all connected by the virus now,  
all one suffering family, and some members  
of it are suffering more than others.  
For Jesus' sake we must do all we can  
to help our brothers and sisters,  
to lift up the folk he called his 'little ones'.  
For he wanders through the shanty towns  
looking for volunteers,  
he lives in the refugee camps  
with those who have nothing.

*Googling for God* (23.4.20)

One of the most Googled words during the Covid-19 pandemic has been 'prayer'. Like cases of the virus, searches have grown exponentially, doubling in number with every 80,000 cases of coronavirus. This, I think, is no coincidence. Sitting alone in their houses and flats, people have reached out for spiritual meaning. Let *us* pray that they found what they were looking for—the abundant life given by our Lord's resurrection.



*Abundant life* (24.4.20)

Out of the darkest night  
comes the brilliance of the light;  
out of our suffering, insight.

This will never ever prove  
that the suffering's from above  
but that, in it, we have God's love.

Life abundant is God's will  
and we can know it still  
all around us, in the garden, on the hill.

But our inner gardens glowing  
are where life grows overflowing,  
God's grace, love, and peace ever showing.

*Emmaus Sunday* (26.4.20)

Only two weeks ago  
the deaths reached ten thousand—  
now they have passed twenty  
and the predictions are  
that we will reach thirty  
by the end of May.  
Do you not see, O Lord,  
what has happened in our cities?  
Have you not heard the news,  
were you the only one to miss it?  
But perhaps it is we who do not see,  
who do not recognize your presence with us.  
As the darkness gets deeper for many  
we ask you to stay with us,  
blind as we can be at times,  
and in the ordinary things  
reveal to us your presence.  
Help us to go on blessing and hoping,  
taking and breaking unconsecrated loaves  
until, in a flash, we see you, too,  
giving us today our daily bread.

*Beautiful feet* (28.4.20; based on Matthew 28: 9)

According to our reading from Matthew,  
on Easter morning, as the women ran  
to tell the disciples, 'He is risen!',  
they suddenly met Jesus himself,  
who called out to them his greetings.  
The two Marys fell down on their knees,  
clasped his feet, and worshipped him.  
Why his feet, I wonder, and why  
is this verse so little known?  
Of all the resurrection appearances  
it is the one most rarely read in church.  
Those wounded feet the women had wept over  
on the hill, so beautiful now that he was risen.  
'How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of those who bring glad tidings',  
we read in Isaiah, and we need good news right now.  
In Jesus we have it: even here,  
in our locked-down, pared-down life.  
For even now Blake's vision of those feet  
walking our hills and seeing our satanic mills  
lives on in our care homes and hospitals  
and we know that Christ keeps his promises,  
treading the wards in doctors and nurses  
who risk their lives to show his compassion.  
So we stand today in silence  
to remember those who died.

*Heroes and anti-heroes (30.4.20)*

Captain Tom Moore turned a hundred today  
and received more than 125,000 cards.  
This is in honour of his having raised £32 million  
for the NHS by walking with his frame  
a hundred times round his garden.  
And an even greater honour is that  
he has been given the ceremonial rank  
of Colonel for his amazing efforts.  
But as well as people like him  
there are others taking advantage  
of the lockdown in a different way.  
Three valuable paintings have been stolen  
from Christ Church Picture Gallery,  
including one of my favourites, Carracci's *Boy Drinking*.  
It is a masterpiece of foreshortening  
and a brilliant evocation of glass and water.  
The galleries in quarantine have been showing  
virtual tours of their exhibits on TV,  
so they're among the heroes too,  
keeping up our appreciation of beauty.  
Thank God for the heroes and the beauty,  
and may the anti-heroes fail to profit  
by their larceny.

*Testing, testing, 123,000 (2.5.20)*

On 2 April, Matt Hancock announced a target of 100,000 virus tests by the end of the month. Many people said he wouldn't make it as the end of the month approached, but, amazingly, it was exceeded. Now the essential thing is to track and trace if we are ever to get out of lockdown. Care homes meanwhile are still waiting for tests, including those for the asymptomatic, and for those with symptoms, tests will be available for people of my age. It isn't very clear how one actually accesses a test, especially one delivered to one's home, but for the moment I shall hope not to need it. 'You shall not put your Lord to the test', we read in the Bible, nor shall we need to, for God is always reliable, always ready to help us as we live through testing times.

*Many dwelling places (3.5.20)*

So now morning service is streamed to our homes  
and we chat over coffee on Zoom;  
then in the evenings we meditate  
as though we were in the same room.

Even some people who live overseas  
can join us to worship and pray.  
We can be scattered across the whole world  
but joined on the Lord's special day.

Apparently since the lockdown was imposed  
more people than ever attend;  
twenty per cent more adherents have joined  
and more still pray for it to end.

Telephone prayers reach those who have not  
access to worship online;  
truly the Church is more vibrant and hale  
as we are all called to combine.

God's comfort for those who are mourning a loss,  
courage to work the night through;  
hope for the future and faith for the now—  
all this is promised to you!

*In my Father's house (4.5.20)*

In my Father's house are peace and comfort,  
in my Father's house are love and care.  
In my Father's house are many dwellings,  
homes of joy and hope, of faith to share.

In my Father's house all will be welcome,  
in my Father's house help will abound.  
In my Father's house there is a banquet—  
and at top table poor folk will be found.

For my Father's house is not a building  
but the whole world that Jesus came to save;  
and my Father's house is deep within you,  
waiting to give you all the good you crave.

*Not an appearance, but a disappearance?* (4.5.20; based on  
Luke 23: 56–24: 12)

‘Why do you seek the living among the dead?  
He is not here; he has been raised.’

How did the women feel as they heard these words?

They were perplexed, we read—

Who had rolled away the stone?

Why was the tomb empty?

And who were these men in dazzling white?

But then the men reminded them of Jesus’ words

about his being raised on the third day,

and slowly, haltingly, they began to understand.

‘Oh yes, he told us, didn’t he?’

But we thought it was a figure of speech.’

And how to express this to the apostles?

They could not even dress his body with their myrrh.

Maybe if they came back still carrying full jars,

maybe then they would have something to show for it?

So running, babbling, they came back to that locked room

and poured out the things they had seen and heard,

and the spices they had prepared. Here was proof.

But only Peter went to check it out

and he was perplexed also.

It ended up being dismissed as an idle tale,

gossip typical of women.

It was not an appearance, but a disappearance.

I wonder how all those thousands feel

when their partners disappear into hospital

and then, without a chance to say goodbye,

without even the chance to dress them for burial,

suddenly they are gone.

But Jesus is not a figure of speech



and new life in him is no idle gossip.  
So be comforted by the knowledge  
that your loved ones will be well looked after.  
They have not disappeared—they have been raised.  
For he said: ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled;  
in my Father’s house are many dwelling places.’

*Clear as mud* (7.5.20)

Rumours abound that the lockdown will be eased  
but we have to wait until Sunday to find out.  
Mixed messages are coming from the media—  
on the one hand they talk about scrapping stay-at-home,  
but on the other stress that the situation is dangerous.  
It isn't clear who is spreading the rumours  
but it seems to be the media rather than the government.  
Meanwhile the number of deaths has passed 30,000  
and a large proportion are in care homes.  
Has the lockdown been the success the government are claiming  
or the shambles that the journalists talk of?  
It seems clear that the care-home sector  
has been badly let down and undervalued.  
And older people shielding in the community  
are becoming sorely isolated.  
O Lord, help us to see what is ours to do  
and how we can comfort the bereaved.  
And remind us of your reliability  
and the life that knows no bounds.

*Not alone* (10.5.20)

'I will not leave you desolate;  
you are not alone.  
The Holy Spirit surely comes  
to help you all be one.'

But maybe it doesn't feel like that,  
maybe you feel distraught  
and cannot find a hand to hold  
or any positive thought.

Maybe you have loved and lost  
the ones who were most dear  
or simply feel abandoned  
with your sore grief and fear.

See how community has grown  
and neighbours come to know  
that spirit of love and helpfulness  
Christ said that we should show.

And so give thanks for life itself  
and pray with gratitude  
for we shall find that thankfulness  
will bring a lighter mood.

'I will not leave you desolate;  
you are not alone.  
The Holy Spirit surely comes  
to help you all be one.'

## *VE Day* (10.5.20)

How different it was  
from all that had been planned—  
Westminster Abbey empty  
and Trafalgar Square too;  
no thronging crowds  
at Buckingham Palace,  
but social distancing  
being observed in the streets,  
and hardly any people  
to socially distance anyway.  
But the few surviving veterans  
came to pay their respects  
and to remember comrades  
whose names were in front of them.  
And wreaths were laid  
in memory of those who made  
the ultimate sacrifice.  
More than ten times the number  
so far killed here by the virus,  
but still there is a similarity  
as ordinary men and women,  
the ones we don't pay enough  
or usually even think about,  
are honoured on our  
essential workers' day  
each Thursday. The Spirit is  
still at work in our communities  
and, as Jesus said,  
we are not left to go it alone.

*Christian Aid Week* (10.5.20)

Another triumph of ingenuity  
as our Christian Aid Week was launched  
not by the street market  
but by various initiatives online.

What would we have done  
at this time without the Internet?

Its influence is not just local,  
but global—and distant needs  
are brought by email and TV  
into our living rooms.

One focus is refugee camps  
such as those in Bangladesh,  
where Rohingyas, already  
traumatized and homeless,  
have to fear the spread  
of coronavirus, which may now  
run rampage through the  
tightly packed humanity.

So let us show the full humanity  
of Christ by being fully human  
ourselves, and give generously  
to try to avert such disasters.

*Nightingale* (12.5.20)

The birds seem to sing louder  
now that the traffic has abated,  
and many of us have had  
our ears reborn  
to this balmy music.  
Not the nightingales, here,  
but many other birds  
which often accompany  
our evening meditations.  
And someone sent a recording  
of nightingales to the BBC  
so that we all could hear  
their ingenious song.

The word has taken on  
a new definition  
in the fight to control  
the coronavirus, as eight  
vast new hospitals  
were built in days  
and named for the nurse  
who trod the wards of Crimea.  
And so it is appropriate  
that, as today we celebrate  
two hundred years  
since that great woman's birth,  
her very principles of care  
are still being practised  
in our new Nightingale wards,  
the lamp is lit,  
and the evening throbs  
with an unearthly singing.

*The Ending* (12.5.20; based on Mark 16: 1–11)

Is this the end?  
Has so much hope  
been crucified  
with our master?  
And are we not  
to have even  
the comfort  
of our myrrh?  
That terrifying  
vision in the empty tomb,  
that man in dazzling white—  
can we believe his words  
or carry his message back  
to our weeping, mourning men?  
It is too much.

But wait—  
there is another story  
brought by Mary Magdalene  
alone—she saw him alive!  
But still the men  
refuse to countenance  
her tale, and no one  
does anything to respond.  
If that's the case,  
why do they gather  
like millions gone before?  
What is this conviction  
that has sustained them,

and this courage,  
if not belief?

It is not the end,  
for they, we, are Church  
and we know  
he lives.



*Ascension* (15.5.20, for Ascension Day 21.5.20 and Sunday  
after Ascension 24.5.20)

‘Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?’

ask the men in white.

‘His disappearing feet

have walked the walk

and he has talked the talk,

so it is up to you now

to keep calm and carry on.

The Holy Spirit is coming

and will be with you

in power, so that you

can be witnesses

throughout the earth.

Do not be afraid,

for you are one

in him, as he is one

in the Father,

and the Father

is one in all things.

Do not look up at the sky,

but see, the whole world

is spread out before you.

Return to Jerusalem

and await the Spirit.’

*Virtuality* (18.5.20)

A virtual version  
of the Chelsea Flower Show  
will begin today  
and galleries  
all over the world  
are streaming virtual tours.  
Worship has become  
virtual also—and many  
people who wouldn't come  
to physical church services  
are joining in,  
feeling less conspicuous  
as all have to cope with  
the unfamiliar format.  
Differences in theology  
seem to have become  
less important  
as technology brings  
us all together.  
May we all be one  
as Jesus and the Father  
are one in love and mercy.

*Black hole* (18.5.20, Mental Health Awareness Week)

A training course  
for preventing suicide  
has been running  
for the past six weeks,  
anticipating a further increase  
in anxiety and depression  
as people wilt in lockdown.  
Once again I think  
of those sinking  
into the mire  
without anyone  
to keep them company  
and lift their spirits.  
And once again  
I give thanks  
for space to live in  
and for companionship  
from someone who  
understands my moods  
and knows how to  
bring me back  
out of them.

*Mary Magdalene* (20.5.20)

To hear that voice  
saying my name  
was to know that  
he truly was risen.  
Before I turned round  
I knew my tears  
were over.  
Only one person  
could say 'Mary'  
in that tender way,  
and now its music  
is implanted  
in my soul for ever.

*Aldersgate Sunday* (22.5.20 for 24.5.20)

'I felt my heart strangely warmed.'  
That was how John Wesley  
described his experience  
as he listened to a  
reading on Romans  
at a meeting in Aldersgate Street.

That sparking of the Spirit  
was the occasion  
for his ultimate conversion  
and gave rise to  
a life spent sharing  
the love of God with all.

For me, Romans shines with  
the declaration that  
nothing—nothing in all creation—  
can separate us  
from the love of God  
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is true still today.  
Nothing—not coronavirus  
or any of the problems  
that we face in the world  
will be able to break  
the bonds of love.

And so we can look forward  
to Pentecost, when the  
flame of the Holy Spirit  
comes with power  
to overcome all obstacles  
and warm our hearts as well.

*Furore* (26.5.20)

As the huge row  
over the PM's chief adviser  
and his trip to Durham  
continues, it is the ones  
whose sacrifices have been  
greatest during the lockdown  
who are most hurt  
and, in some cases, angry.  
But isn't this directing us  
towards the really urgent issues  
of inequality and hardship  
in our society, as we try  
to ease the lockdown?  
The people who are struggling  
to feed their families  
or to manage on their own,  
the ones for whom hardship  
is a constant problem  
only exacerbated by the virus  
are the ones whose voices  
we should heed, the ones  
we should be trying to help;  
not to mention those  
sharing a tap with  
hundreds of others  
in Yemen and Cox's Bazar.  
Let the furore die down,  
but not our passion for justice  
or our prayers for those  
so much worse off than ourselves.

*Pentecost* (26.5.20 for 31.5.20)

O great gift  
of wind and fire,  
of word and action,  
inspire us now  
to share the Word  
in new tongues  
of love and compassion.

Heal our squabbling  
over who did what, when,  
and why, that we may  
be intent instead  
on witnessing to  
the life of Jesus  
and his risen  
and ascended glory.

Show us how to speak  
not so much  
with our own voices  
but in the tones  
of the One who came  
to share himself  
with the world,  
and reigns now  
with the Father  
and with you in heaven.

*Multitude (28.5.20)*

A hundred thousand deaths  
now in the United States—  
an almost unimaginable number  
when you think how many  
must be grieving there today.

O Comforter and Advocate,  
draw near to them and us  
and translate our groans  
into words of compassion  
and actions of healing.

Assure us all of God's love  
and of the grace and tenderness  
with which our loved ones will be met,  
so that the balm of forgiveness  
can wash away all failings.



*Change* (1.6.20)

With the new month  
we have new rules  
giving greater freedom  
but also involving risk.

So some children go back  
to school, while others  
stay at home; some people meet  
in socially distanced groups.

But the riskiest change  
is for the shielded  
who can go out after  
ten weeks in total confinement.

There's much hesitation,  
for change is always hard  
and we have become accustomed  
to our locked-down life at home.

We hope against hope  
there will be no further surge  
of the virus, and trust  
that all shall be well.

*Trinity* (3.6.20 for 7.6.20)

Dance of love in three steps,  
care and grace and mercy,  
you are with us always  
to the end of this pandemic  
and beyond.

Face of wonder, Father,  
present in creation,  
you are with us always  
till your gifts are loved and nurtured  
and transformed.

Son who shared our being  
and taught us true compassion,  
you are with us always  
in those who care for others,  
those who heal.

Spirit, source of courage,  
comforter, defender,  
you are with us always  
wherever there's injustice,  
fear, or pain.

Spirit, Son, and Father,  
inspirer, friend, creator,  
you are with us always  
until the new beginning  
dawns on earth.

*I can't breathe* (6.6.20)

Thousands protesting  
throughout the world  
as another Afro-American death,  
brutal and callous,  
smears the reputation  
of the American police.

Millions worried  
as investigations show  
that BAME people  
are more likely  
to die of Covid-19  
than almost any others.

What have we done, Lord,  
with your commandment to love?  
How have we reached this abyss?  
Lord, have mercy,  
have mercy on our souls,  
and lead us into all truth.

*The labourers are few* (10.6.20 for 14.6.20;  
based on Matthew 9: 37)

Soft fruits a-plenty  
are going unpicked,  
for the migrants can't get here  
and the quotas are fixed.

For us, this means produce  
left in the field,  
for the migrants—no money  
to buy the next meal.

Appeals go out  
to the home unemployed:  
'Come, pick our fresh strawberries  
so we can avoid

the waste of the harvest,  
the loss for the poor.'  
But the candidates haver  
because they want more.

'You received without paying,  
now serve without pay',  
said our Lord as he sent out  
the Apostles that day.

The harvest is plentiful,  
the labourers are few—  
God's work for the kingdom  
is waiting for YOU!

*Lifebelt* (15.6.20 for 21.6.20; based on Psalm 69 and Matthew 10: 30)

You may have more troubles than hairs on your head,  
you might not be able to sleep;  
you could be in debt to the landlord or bank,  
you feel you might drown in the deep.

There's one place to turn to that won't let you down;  
there's one who has counted those hairs,  
a God who so loved you he sent you his Son,  
good Jesus, who passionately cares.

So turn to the Lord who is patient and kind,  
whose strength will not falter or fail;  
who'll carry you safe to the farthest of shores,  
whose comfort will always avail.

*As the deer* (24.6.20; based on Psalm 42)

Parched and tired, the muntjac  
creeps toward the waterhole,  
tempted to run, but shy  
of other animals there.

This is the clear stream,  
the crystal fountain  
for which she has longed  
and searched for days.

Like her, we seek out  
sustenance and moisture  
in a dry land, but our need  
is to find the fount of grace.

And when we do, sometimes  
in the unlikeliest of places,  
we can only praise you,  
our living God, source of all joy.

A sip of your water is enough  
to turn our dry brown edges  
back to green again, enough  
to satisfy our thirst for ever.

Selah!

*'Come unto me'* (1.7.20; based on Matthew 11: 28–9)

Wearying of all the uncertainty  
and heavy-laden with grief,  
it can seem logical to turn away  
into our own darkness.

But there is one strong enough  
and compassionate enough  
to walk beside us, to lead us  
back into the light.

'Come,' he says, 'and share my yoke.'  
Coupled with him we too are strong;  
so do not turn away into despair,  
but let him lead you into peace.

*Independence Day* (4.7.20)

It was the day when hospitality  
turned into a reality—  
hotels, restaurants, bars were open  
(or, at least, those that could manage the new rules).

It was the day when hairdressers began  
to cut our flowing locks again—  
no more hair in the eyes or mouth  
(although they still didn't cut hair any longer).

It was the day when art and history  
were revived, as was the mystery  
of science, as museums could open  
(though most weren't actually ready yet).

It was a day of freedom in the air  
but mixed with hesitation and care  
as some people ventured into town  
(and we all took a deep breath, hoping for the best).

As for me, I stayed at home  
and watched old tennis on TV!



*Van Gogh and the Sower* (9.7.20 for 12.7.20; based on Matthew 13: 1–9 and 18–23)

Van Gogh painted the Sower  
over and over again  
as though he needed to remind  
himself constantly of the message.

As a young man, before art,  
he professed the ambition  
to be a ‘sower of the word’,  
following in the footsteps of his father.

He became a trainee preacher  
in London, and later tried to study  
theology, but the seed fell by the wayside  
and he turned to art instead.

His first images of the Sower  
were copies of Millet’s prints,  
but Van Gogh needed his own roots  
and he sought depth of earth elsewhere.

Soon he branched out into paint,  
but his pictures were dark and dreary,  
choked by the thorns of the hard  
life he had chosen for himself.

In Arles he sowed light and colour—  
glorious violet and yellow fields—  
but although the conditions were right  
no one wanted to buy his pictures.

Still he repeated his practice,  
the Sower haloed by an orange sun,  
but it wasn’t till long after he died  
that we realized what great fruit he had borne.

*A friendly word* (18.7.20)

A week of new adventures—  
drinking in a café,  
riding on a bus—  
it makes me feel five again!  
But these outings weren't  
without their 'dangerous' side—  
passing other people,  
accepting a drink from someone's hand.  
Who would have thought  
such everyday experiences  
could become so strange?  
It was good that others  
were behaving as if this was  
nothing new, no big deal.  
There was camaraderie  
on the bus, as we sat  
spaced out, wearing our masks.  
People are just people after all  
and deserve a friendly word.

*Nothing but love* (23.7.20 for 26.7.20; based on Romans 8: 38–9)

However much our lives may be disrupted,  
there's one thing that can keep us firm, secure:  
nothing at all can come between us  
for God's love is dependable and sure.

Even death shall not be a disaster,  
for there's no power greater than this love.  
Everlasting life is ours in Jesus,  
and this is our crowning joy to prove:

he came to be our true companion,  
he was born as a human full of life;  
he overcame the death that he would suffer  
and he rose to triumph over strife.

*Don't look down* (9.8.20; based on Matthew 14: 30,  
*The Message*)

Going out at the moment  
is rather like Peter  
walking on water—  
you're all right as long as  
you don't look down.

Like a tightrope walker  
you negotiate the narrow rope  
between getting too close  
and feeling safe  
because of your mask and distancing.

Public confidence is still  
quite low among  
the vulnerable—  
why throw away all that has  
been won by staying at home?

But for Peter it was a matter  
of continuing to trust (or not)  
in the miraculous powers  
of Jesus. Maybe we too  
could learn something from this.

*I AM who I AM* (26.8.20 for Sunday 30.8.20; based on Exodus 3: 1-15)

An impersonal phrase  
becomes much  
more alluring when  
it is made personal,  
as Moses learned when  
he turned aside at the  
burning bush that did not  
consume itself,  
but lit up the scene.

Nowadays we say  
of the things we  
do not understand,  
'it is what it is',  
but Moses turned aside  
and listened to God  
as God promised  
to lead his people  
out of Egypt.

Believing God, he  
nevertheless wanted  
a name to take back  
to the people,  
in case they asked  
on whose authority  
he took charge.

'I AM who I AM', said God,  
'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.'

Jesus too used this name  
'I am', being himself

the Word of God.  
'I am the light of the world',  
he said, and we read in John  
that the light  
shines in the darkness  
and the darkness  
could not put it out.

So when darkness  
enters your life,  
do not be afraid  
but trust in the One  
who IS; turn aside to God  
and God will  
illuminate your darkness somehow.  
The light might at first  
feel like a fire burning you up,  
but you will not be  
consumed: just BE.

*Coming home* (8.9.20)

Coming back to Wesley Mem  
after months of absence  
would, I thought, feel very strange,  
just as the first weeks  
shut out of church had been.  
There was plenty to make it so—  
not least the prohibition on singing.  
Whoever heard of a Methodist service  
without any hymns?  
Then, of course, there was the distancing,  
whole rows of chairs with crosses on them,  
and people dotted about the Sanctuary.  
And the mask-wearing,  
so that only half of each face showed.

But, even so, Wesley Mem itself  
hadn't changed at all.  
I felt the same sense  
of coming home  
as when I first walked in there  
forty-four years ago,  
the same warmth and fellowship  
as we gathered to worship God.  
I wondered whether the church  
had been lonely, too,  
robbed of all its people,  
and whether it enjoyed  
gathering us in once more  
so that building and worshippers  
were once again united.

We were Church for all those months anyway,  
but it's good to come back home.

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