

# Lift up your hearts

**W**ELCOME to a new initiative from the Church Times. Each week for the foreseeable future — not that much is foreseeable at the moment — we plan to produce a collection of prayers and reflections which, we hope, will help to support people who are deprived



of the gifts that come from churchgoing. Everything here will appear on [www.churchtimes.co.uk](http://www.churchtimes.co.uk), and, from next week, on a page in the printed paper; but we are designing it to fit on an A4 sheet, downloadable for free from our website, so that individuals and churches can print copies for distribution to those stuck at home. This first edition is a sample.

We are busy signing up a rota of authors, priests, poets, etc. to act as mentors and guides. But, because this is the first one — and to be frank, because we don't know how many words to commission until we've tried it — I'm putting it together this week.

We shall ask each contributor for a line or two about their situation. One of the aspects of this "plague year" that I've observed already is a loss of formality — which is the reverse of the physical

distancing that we have to exercise, and possibly a reaction to it.

My situation, then. I'm writing this in the study in Southampton. The Church Times is being put together from home by all the staff. My wife is self-isolating on health grounds, and so must I if I hope to join her in a few days.

My daughter has just sent a photo from the "service" that she held with her husband and four-year-old son. Note that the need for a service sheet survives church closures, including the mention of tea and biscuits to end with.

**Next week:** Canon Mark Oakley.



Paul Handley, Editor

## 'I know the weight of your distress'

IN TIMES of difficulty, I turn not to a formal theologian or recognised spiritual writer, but to an old companion, Samuel Johnson (1709-84). Johnson was well acquainted with chronic illness, loneliness, and bereavement: his wife, Tetty, died when he was 43, and for the next 32 years he observed the anniversary of her death in mourning and prayer.

The attraction of Johnson is that he tells it like it is. When justifying a donation to beggars, even if they intended to spend it on tobacco or gin, he argued: "Life is a pill which none of us can bear to swallow without gilding."

This passage comes from a letter written on 27 July 1778 to James Elphinston, whose wife had just died:

Sir  
Having myself suffered what you are now suffering, I well know the weight of your distress, how much need you have of comfort, and how little comfort can be given.



"Very busy putting his books in order": illustration by E. H. Shepard from *Everybody's Boswell* (1930)

A loss, such as yours, lacerates the mind, and breaks the whole system of purposes and hopes. It leaves a dismal vacuity in life, which affords nothing on which the affections can fix, or to which endeavour may be directed. All this I have known, and it is now, in the vicissitude of things, your turn to know it.

But . . . what would be the wretchedness of life, if there was not something always in view, some Being, immutable and unailing, to whose mercy man may have recourse. . .

The greatest being is the most benevolent. We must not grieve for the dead as men without hope, because we know that they are in his hands. We have, indeed, not leisure to grieve long, because we are hastening to follow them. Your race and mine have been interrupted by many obstacles, but we must humbly hope for a happy end.

I am, Sir,  
Your most humble servant,  
Sam: Johnson.

*Dr Johnson: His life in letters*, edited by David Littlejohn (Spectrum, 1965)

## ‘Not huddled like frightened sheep’

THE immediacy of the present threat is, in the present age, unprecedented. There are parallels, however, in other existential threats that humanity has faced. The ecological crisis is one; another is the nuclear threat — not eliminated, but felt more keenly by a former generation.

One was C. S. Lewis, whose words, written in 1948, went viral last week:

“How are we to live in an atomic age?” I am tempted to reply: “Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an

age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents.”

In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented: and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways. We had, indeed, one very great advantage over our ancestors — anaesthetics; but we have that still.

It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things — praying, working, teaching, read-



ing, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts — not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.

“On Living in an Atomic Age”

## A new order of life and love

CANON Angus Ritchie, director of the Centre for Theology and Community, and the *Church Times*'s current guide to the week's Bible readings, has noted in a blog post four elements in Christ's ministry which relate to the present crisis:

First, Jesus recognises that some of the most important ministry happens in the moments that seem like interruptions. We see this most strikingly in the attention Jesus pays to the woman with the haemorrhage on the way to heal Jairus's daughter (Luke 8.40-56). But it is also a central message of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Second, from his birth to his death, Jesus places the poorest and most vulnerable at the heart of his Church. The Church is

not to be an “us” who ministers to those in need: the “us” must include those in greatest need. . . She must stand in solidarity with those, within and outside her, who are made vulnerable by social injustice.

Third, Jesus bears witness to a new order of life and love, without denying the reality of the old order of sin and death. Jesus's miracles do not herald an end to all illness, and the two men he raises from the dead will die again (Luke 7.11-17; John 11.1-45). They are signs of a new creation — for we

glimpse in the now something that will only be completed in the life to come.

And the final, and most fundamental, aspect of Jesus's ministry: it only makes sense in the context of resurrection hope. At this time, more than ever, it is crucial to get our theology the right way round. “Resurrection life” is not an edifying spiritual metaphor for the way Christians should live in “here and now”. Christian life in the “here and now” is a Spirit-filled anticipation of a Kingdom yet to come.

**WHILE churchgoing is not an option, Christians of all traditions are drawing on Catholics when it comes to making an act of spiritual communion (teaching about which can be found in a rubric in the order for the communion of the sick in the Book of Common Prayer). This prayer comes from the Oxford Movement Centenary Prayer Book (Church Literature Association, 1933):**

*O Lord Jesus Christ, since I cannot now receive Thee sacramentally, I humbly pray Thee that Thou wouldest come spiritually to my soul.*

*Come, Lord Jesus, come and cleanse me, heal me, strengthen me, and unite me to Thyself, now and for evermore. Amen*

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