

Dear all

As I am writing this, I am listening to a new CD by a group I have only just come across, called Les Barocudas. The name is, presumably, a play on words, combining barracuda (the fish – though with some interesting, if not dubious, slang meanings!) with baroque (music). In 2019 they decided to produce a CD titled *La Peste* (The Plague), consisting of music written during the plagues of the 17th century, either reflecting the experience, or as a direct challenge to its effects on society. Some of the composers featured actually died from the disease.

It was with great dramatic irony that, in the time between that decision and the release of the CD, we should have been hit by our very own COVID ‘plague’. The music became suddenly much more relevant than they could have ever expected. It is a delightful CD, played on violin, bass violin, viola da gamba, organ and harpsichord. The music is often bouncy and joyful, though there are also moments of quite powerful feelings. It seems to speak of many things, not least the power of music both to reflect our human conditions, and to face head-on and challenge the darker side of life and human experience. As I quoted in my sermon yesterday, “There may be trouble ahead, but while there’s moonlight and music and love and romance, let’s face the music and dance”.

There does seem to be in human nature – and especially in what we would like to consider essentially British character – a desire to stick 2 fingers up to fate, and let life go on. We have a phrase “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die”. This is a conflation of two biblical sayings, Ecclesiastes 8:15, “Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry”, and Isaiah 22:13, “Let us eat and drink; for to morrow we shall die.” Interestingly, both of these contexts are not particularly laudable. Ecclesiastes is a cynical book, which explores the futility of life – “well, we might as well eat, drink and be merry, because we’ll soon be dead!” Isaiah contrasts the proper response of repentance and turning to God in the face of tragedy with the ‘carry on with the party, it will never happen’ attitude of the Jewish people. Perhaps this latter response especially is not dissimilar to the actions that made the second lockdown inevitable.

I would say, however, that this music reflects something altogether more positive – a desire not to let the virus be the whole defining feature of our life. There is so much more to life that we can still experience and enjoy, albeit perhaps in a different way. Many have expressed the fear that COVID will cancel Christmas. It won’t! God was still incarnate in a little baby. That child was... is... still the light that has come into the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it! We may, sadly, not be able to bellow out our carols in a packed church on Christmas Eve, or gather with our extended family for Christmas dinner (though who knows, perhaps we still may!), but we can still experience and share that hope of peace, and of life in all its fulness. So, eat, drink, be merry, dance, listen to music, for tomorrow – we LIVE!

Here is the recording of Sonata Tertia by Johann Heinrich Schmelzer, performed by Les Barocudas. Schmelzer lived in Vienna a century before Mozart, and himself succumbed to the plague in 1680.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEWA9KI8dQs>

This week is a particularly significant week for prayer. I have already mentioned both the Archbishops’ Call to Prayer for the Nation, and specifically the European Day of Prayer for Schools, which is tomorrow (17th). This is a particularly important time to pray for our schools. Teachers are run ragged trying to cope with COVID-safe practices or having to produce online lessons at the drop of a hat, if groups of children suddenly have to isolate due to COVID contact. Allied to this, there is the stress that there is still much uncertainty how safe schools are – while children may be largely immune to COVID, there is still concern over whether they can spread it. Teachers are facing this every day with no PPE, except perhaps masks. This evening, the intention of the Call to Prayer is for schools and colleges, children, and young people.

A reminder that intentions for each day of the week have been suggested:

Sunday: family, friends, and loved ones;

Monday: schools and colleges, children, and young people;

Tuesday: the elderly, those who are isolated and vulnerable;

Wednesday: businesses, the workplace, and economic wellbeing;

Thursday: the NHS and other key workers;

Friday: national and local governments;

Saturday: all who are grieving, those suffering with physical and mental health.

It is good to be back phoning folk again, catching up and seeing how things are going. Most I have spoken to seem to feel more positive than in the 1st lockdown, despite the nights drawing in and days being darker for longer. Perhaps this is because it is less of a shock. Perhaps that we have got our coping mechanisms sorted out more. Or perhaps because there is more happening, more people about, more open etc. I have added something to my daily regime. You may recall that we have a prayer diary, where the roads of the parish are divided up so that each day we pray for 2 or 3, and cover the whole parish in a month. I have taken to cycling round the parish, visiting each road, and praying in situ, usually after morning prayer. Not only does it provide exercise, but I'm also getting to know the geography very well. And it's fascinating seeing themes in roads – e.g. the flowers, the birds, apples etc.. However, one thought did come to mind – why did I have to group the roads alphabetically, rather than geographically?! Day 8, for example, is Curlew Walk, Custom Road, and Eastgate – one end of the parish to the other. If you see me on my cycles, do wave!

If you would like a copy of the prayer diary, do let me know, and I can email it in a Word document.

Here is a very helpful poster that I saw in the Deepings' School newsletter:

A MENTAL HEALTH GUIDE TO COPING WITH LOCKDOWN IN THE WINTER

 @BELIEVEPHQ

LIGHTING



On dark mornings wake up gradually with increasing light. Try out a SAD light or lumie bodyclock

STAY CONNECTED



Even though it might be difficult to see friends and family it is important that you stay connected to them on a regular basis

HELP OTHERS



Whether it is helping around the house or supporting your brother or sister, helping others can help provide you with positive emotions

LIMIT NEWS



Limit the amount of time you spend on social media and checking news

COPING STRATEGIES



Identify some positive strategies you can engage in that help you to deal with stress, worry or anxiety

CONNECT TO YOUR VALUES



Re connect with things that are important to you and try to engage with them on a regular basis

TAKE TIME FOR YOURSELF



Plan time into your week where you can engage in activities that are relaxing. It is important to have time for yourself where you engage in some self care

PLAN YOUR WEEK



Organise your week and plan in activities that provide you with a sense of pleasure and achievement

STAY ACTIVE



Throughout the day try and be active. Take a break from your work and walk around. Regular exercise can also be great for reducing stress and boosting mood

POSITIVE HABITS



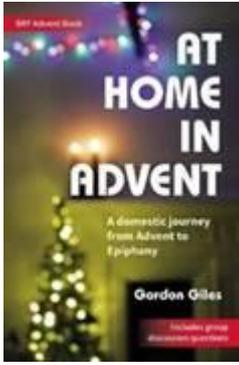
Write down a list of 5 - 10 positive mental health habits you can engage with on a regular basis to maintain your mental fitness

ASK FOR HELP



If you notice yourself struggling reach out to family, friends, your doctor or a local mental health charity for help





Finally, I mentioned in an earlier letter that we would be following an Advent Course, based on the book *At Home in Advent* by Gordon Giles.

As a reminder, I quoted *The Church Times*: *In the BRF Advent Book, Gordon Giles identifies the three Advent themes that his reflections seek to explore: "hope, expectation and trepidation". At Home in Advent is intended both for individual use and for groups. With daily thoughts accompanied by questions, activities, and prayers, it offers a "domestic journey from Advent to Epiphany". The unpretentious text takes account of the coronavirus threat without traumatising the reader. Its very domesticity would make this book the perfect present for someone on lockdown.*

The author believes in the "bounty of Christmas" and is happy to find this bounty in the everyday. Here is a timely reminder that, while some of the celebrations may be different this year, it is impossible to "cancel" Christmas.

I suggested various ways you could order the book. It would be easier, under current circumstances, to order the book yourselves, but if anyone wishes me to order on, I would be happy to, and I could pop it through their letter box. The cost should hopefully be a maximum of £8, possibly less. Please let me know by Sunday 22nd at the latest.

It would also be very helpful if you would let me know if you intend to join in with a group on Zoom. If you're not familiar with Zoom, it is very easy to set up and use. I can happily explain it to you.

Stay safe



Blessings and love

Mark