

Lift up your hearts



David Hoyle continues our series

I CAME to Westminster Abbey in November. Back then, we all thought we understood the job that needed to be done. Now, the Abbey doors are firmly closed. Where hundreds of visitors would once walk and chatter (or listen to our headsets), there is now silence and space. My colleagues, the Abbey staff and volunteers, who would be here cheerfully managing crowds, are furloughed. The great gates to the Precinct are shut; this really is a locked-down community. We are different, and we look to a different future.

We are the place of national memorial and royal celebration, VE Day, Armistice, the Florence Nightingale celebration: all changed now. How will we “gather” here in months to come? I wonder about the different job that must be done. I wonder, too, how I escape the personal and introverted experience of life in a locked precinct, to find

again the language of the Kingdom where we rejoice and hope together.

What words will we use? What story will we tell? As an ordinand, in a sermon class with Richard Holloway, I offered up a whimsical text beginning with a famous bear. Bad mistake. Richard Holloway fixed me with a stare and said: “I looked for the wildness of grace. And what did I get? Winnie-the-bloody-Pooh.”

He was quite right. God’s grace is a powerful, disturbing thing. In these days, though, worried about the challenges that I face, while others stand in the way of great danger, I am glad to be reminded that grace is not always wild.

My **picture** hangs just up the road from the Abbey, in the National Gallery. Only a few weeks ago, I could slip in for a few moments, to stand before it and regain a little calm, as I adapted to new challenges in a new place. Fra Filippo Lippi’s *Annunciazione* (below) is strong on calm; it was painted for a domestic space. This is a picture and a grace that you can live with. It is a frozen moment, and a carefully enclosed space.

A dove hovers before our Lady’s womb. An enlarged image will show you what looks like a sequence of still camera shots: it is the measured flight of the dove. You will need that larger image, too, to see the tender gold rays that leap towards Mary, announcing the beginning of salvation in Christ. When Elizabeth Jennings wrote

“The Annunciation”, she imagined “great salvations” gripping Mary’s side. Richard Holloway might be pleased by that. This image looks more like what Edwin Muir imagined, an angel and a girl who “neither speak nor movement make”: grace arriving gently, in closed spaces, changing everything.

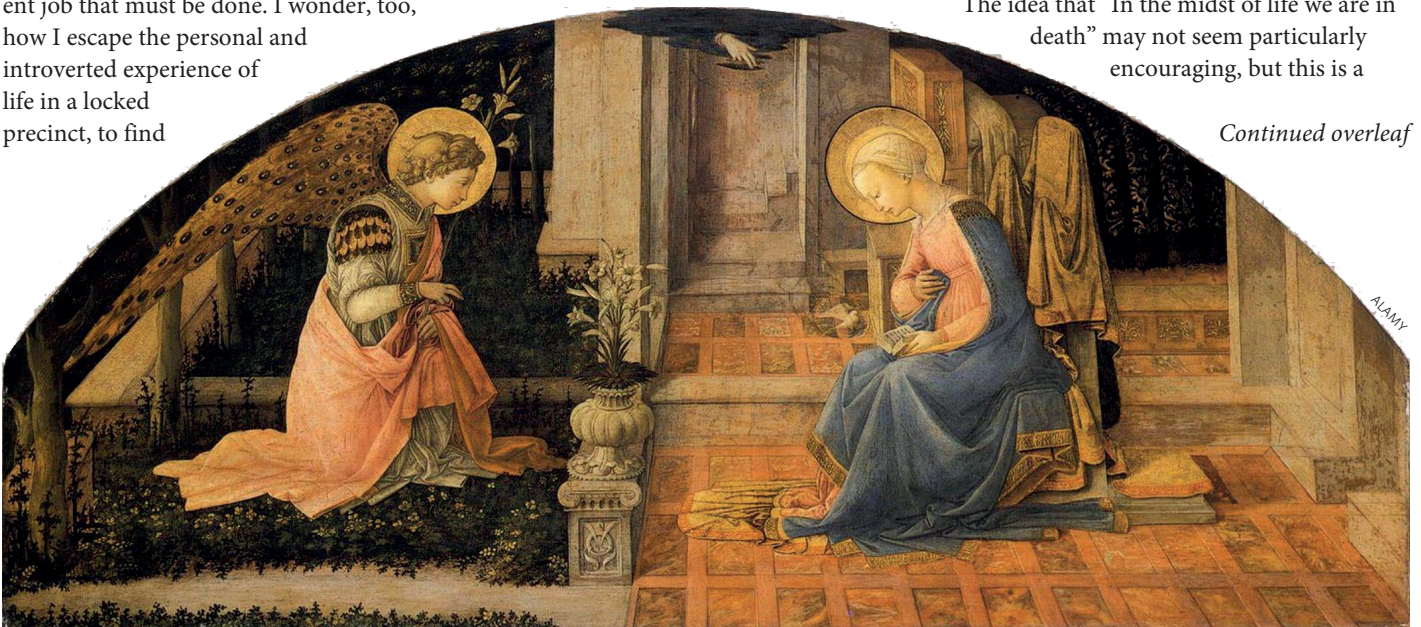
I HAVE been reading a fair amount of poetry and have been sustained by a group of friends exchanging poems by email, under the banner “Pills to Purge Melancholy”. Among some substantial and serious offerings, I encountered the first poem that I have ever seen about serenading an axolotl. The trick, apparently, is to sing “songs of salamanders, give it everything you’ve got”. That made me smile.

For more sustained reading, though, I have not turned to old favourites, because I have wanted some fresh stimulus. I have really enjoyed Anne Tyler’s new **book**, *Redhead by the Side of the Road*. The central character is in a lockdown all of his own. In wonderful prose, Tyler drills deep into a very ordinary life, familiar struggles, and a quiet heroism: “What’s the point of living if you don’t try to do things better?”

I LISTEN occupationally to a great deal of wonderful choral **music**, and now miss both it and our musicians very badly. I have been playing John Sheppard’s *Media Vita* over and over.

The idea that “In the midst of life we are in death” may not seem particularly encouraging, but this is a

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Continued from previous page

sustained meditation on the love and mercy of God, in whom we have our beginning and end. It is also a staggeringly beautiful composition. The top line seems permanently lodged in the heights of heaven, and there is a calm confidence, in a composition that includes a *Nunc Dimittis*, that our eyes will, indeed, see salvation.

AS I look for words and story fit for our different future, I turn to **St Luke's Gospel**

and the road to Emmaus: "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24.27). He tells the two fearful and bewildered travellers a story that gathers all things up and ducks no difficulty; a story that embraces Good Friday and Easter, wrestling hope and meaning out of apparent chaos in a staggering act of theological and historical imagination.

Christ reminds us that we are never isolated from God, and that — whatever

confusions we feel — our story began in creation and ends in redemption.

Reassured, if still challenged, I turn to the **prayer** of one of my greatest predecessors, Lancelot Andrewes: "Be, Lord, within me to strengthen me, without me to preserve, over me to shelter, beneath me to support, before me to direct, behind me to bring back, round about me to fortify." Amen.

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Next week: Margaret Sentamu

What love will do

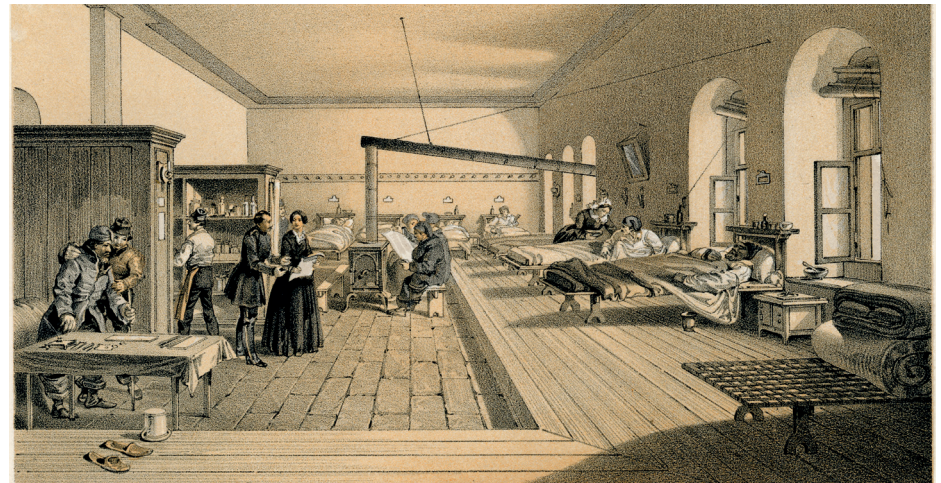
THE nurse and reformer Florence Nightingale, the bicentenary of whose birth was celebrated on Tuesday, was compelled by a deep spiritual calling. Throughout her life, she referred to a "calling" from God which she received on 7 February 1837, when she was 16.

Later, she wrote: "I have seen His face, the crown of glory inseparably united with the crown of thorns, giving forth the same light. Three times he has called me: once to His service (7 February 1837), once to be a Deliverer (7 May 1852), once to the cross (28 July 1865), to suffer more even than I have hitherto done."

Despite — or because of — her direct relationship with God, Florence Nightingale had a complicated relationship with the Church, pointing out its inadequacies and taking issue with some of the doctrines that were then current, not least the casual acceptance that suffering was part of God's will for humanity, a belief that she fought throughout her life. She worked periodically on a theological work, *Suggestions for Thought*, which she never prepared for publication. It was published only as a curiosity later (it runs to 829 pages).

She had only two religious works published during her lifetime, both articles in *Fraser's Magazine* in May and July 1873. In this extract from the first article, "A 'Note' of Interrogation", she depicts infectious disease as both a prompt to stay alert to God and a call to improve social conditions.

IT IS said of the French soldier in an expeditionary force that he always wants to know where he is going, what he is doing, why he is suffering. Except on the condition of letting him know this you will not get out of



Florence Nightingale in one of the reformed wards at Scutari Hospital in the Crimea

him all he can give. And if any can justly be called an expeditionary force, it is surely the expedition of mankind sent by God to conquer earth, to conquer perfection, to create heaven! How can man give his best unless he knows . . . what is God's plan for him in this world and in the next . . . and why He has put him here to suffer so much? . . .

How is it possible to teach either that God is "love" or that God commands any duty, unless God commands any duty, unless God has a plan for bringing each and all of us to perfection? How can we work at all if there be not such a plan? . . .

To please God, I am justly told, is the end of my being, but I must know what God is like, in order to know what is pleasing to Him. The most frightful crimes which this world has ever seen have been perpetrated "to please God" . . .

This is another of those curious practical mistakes extending through centuries from misunderstanding the character of God, the believing Him to be pleased, to be best worshipped, with ceremonial, not moral, service. How could this mistake have originated in Christianity, since Christ may be said to have preached beyond all other things the *spiritual* service of God, the serving Him by serving man? . . .

First, it is no use saying that God is just,

unless we define what justice is. . . Take another word in common use, "love". It is of no use saying that God is love, unless we define what love will do. . .

Take the newspapers of the day for illustrations. (Advertisement of a book): *Fever in London: Its social and sanitary lessons*. Exactly as we find out the real facts, we find that every one of those facts has attached to it just the lesson which will lead us on to social improvement. . .

Now take the real facts of "infection". What is their lesson? Exactly the lesson we should teach, if we wanted to stir man up to social improvement. The lesson of "infection" is to remove the conditions of dirt, of overcrowding, of foulness of every kind under which men live. And even were not so-called "infectious" disease attached to these conditions by the unchanging will of God, it would be inseparable from social improvement that these conditions should be removed.

Disease is Elijah's earthquake, which forces us to attend, to listen to the "still small voice". May we not therefore say that "infection" (facts and doctrine) shows God to be a God of love? And this is but one instance. *Read an article on Florence Nightingale's extraordinary life from the Church Times archive, at churchtimes.co.uk*