

# Lift up your hearts



Rachel Mann writes:

**I**N THE past couple of weeks, I've had many conversations with parishioners which have begun with their asking: "How are you? Are you bearing up?" It's usually me who asks those questions. In a time of self-isolation and shielding, however, the polarities have been reversed.

As someone with underlying health conditions, I was forced by Covid-19 to retreat from public before everyone was instructed to do so. At times like these, I reach out for art, prayer, literature, and film to inspire and comfort me.

THERE are works of art which haunt us. I've never fully recovered from seeing Rembrandt's *Simeon in the Temple* (1669), at the National Gallery in 2014 as part of the "Rembrandt: Late Works" exhibition. It is a miraculous study in vulnerability and love, famously found unfinished in Rembrandt's studio the day after he died.

Rembrandt's near-blind Simeon models intimacy and vulnerability, a life coming apart in paint and old age. At a time when touch is banned, the simple fact that Simeon holds Christ in his arms shatters me. There is promise, however: Simeon waited for his Lord, and received blessing; and we, too, shall come to a time of renewed love and physical closeness.

IN THE late 1990s, I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. I was in and out of hospital a lot, separated from loved ones, and, in the long nights of waiting, I found hope in this short prayer based on Genesis 31.49:



THE PICTURE ART COLLECTION/ALAMY

"Watch between us, dear God, when we are absent from one another." Absence can take many forms, and, in this time of virus, there are potent ways of fostering connection: letters, emails, phone calls, and video apps.

Still, I feel the cut of physical absence. I long for connection. God is the connective tissue in the night-time of my fears.

IT MAY seem perverse to find power in **Psalm 121** when confined indoors in one of the most urbanised parts of Europe. Even if I climbed on to the chimney-pots of my house and strained my vision, I could not say: "I lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help."

Of course, we do not need to see physical hills to imagine them. I long for the wide-open spaces of the hills. The God of "the Heights" — of Zion, and Mount Sinai and, yes, the Pennines, too, is in my heart. He shall "come[th] forth" to liberate us one day.

THE academic Alison Light claims that Golden Age detective fiction is "the literature of convalescence". Classic mystery novels ruled in those decades after the horror of the Great War. They present murder and violence as something which is

both dreadful and — when handled by a Poirot, Miss Marple, or Peter Wimsey — tractable.

In a time of trauma and grief, I reach for literature and film that help me cope and heal. Much as I adore Christie, my "self-isolation" book is Dorothy L. Sayers's *Gaudy Night*. It is a great piece of detective fiction, set primarily in an all-female Oxford college; but it is also a quietly and firmly feminist study of the love between Lord Peter Wimsey and the writer Harriet Vane. If Auden claimed that detective fiction was "an addiction like alcohol or tobacco", *Gaudy Night* is a glass of *Chateau Pétrus* and a fine Havana cigar.

GOLDEN Age stylings are also on show in the recent film *Knives Out*. While my usual go-to movies in times of stress are old favourites —

*Casablanca*, say, or *Gosford Park* —

*Knives Out* is an instant "rest night" classic. It takes all the old mystery fiction tropes — genius amateur detective, dodgy wealthy family, murder and suspects aplenty — and both honours them while throwing them all up in the air. *Knives Out* is witty, clever, and oddly life-affirming.

**Music:** My isolation track is anything sung by Dame Janet Baker, though her voice on the 1965 Barbirolli/LSO recording of Elgar's *Sea Pictures* is unmatched: longing meets strength, and her ability to capture vulnerability in the shadow of sheer power brings me to tears.

**Poetry:** Recently I've found myself reaching for the poems of Edmund Blunden (*Edmund Blunden: Selected Poems*, edited by Robyn Marsack; Carcanet, 2018). Yes, he was a "war poet", but he is so much more. His simplest, most unwarlike poems are shot through with wounds and tenderness that seem both oddly real and comforting in a time of crisis.

And the older I grow, the more I'm mesmerised by the work of "the New England mystic", Emily Dickinson. At this time of

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lockdown and isolation, her quiet intensity — and her capacity to hold a universe in a lyric — strikes me as never more potent. How the world needs her vision, simplicity, and perspicacity (especially “Hope is the thing with feathers”).

THERE is comfort reading and then there is *comfort reading*. I’ve read *Pride and Prejudice* countless times. From its justly famous

opening paragraph to its end, it sparkles.

I adore this brief interchange between Lizzie and Darcy near the novel’s close. We long for beginnings and endings, but — in love as much as in times of pandemic — so often we find we are in the middle of things before we knew they had begun:

“Elizabeth’s spirits soon rising to playfulness again, she wanted Mr Darcy to account for his having ever fallen in love with her. ‘How could you begin?’ said she. ‘I can comprehend your going on charmingly,

when you had once made a beginning; but what could set you off in the first place?’

‘I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I *had* begun.’”

Canon Rachel Mann is Rector of St Nicholas’s, Burnage, and Visiting Fellow of Manchester Met University.

Next week: Amy Scott Robinson

## St Mary the Vulnerable

A READER, Andrea Chance, was prompted by the first issue of “Lift Up Your Hearts” to send a painting of hers. She writes: “The *Church Times* photograph of a bomb-blasted Madonna in a Mosul church [reproduced here] enabled me to resolve this painting. I am a perpetual student of iconography and this began as a Hodegetria in which I had miscalculated the sacred geometry.

I put it to one side, hoping that at some future date a way forward would be revealed. Your photograph was the catalyst.”

Whether conscious of it or not, Ms Chance was following a devotional tradition that began nearly 500 years ago. Statues of the Virgin Mary which had been damaged by Protestant iconoclasts were afforded a special status by the Roman Catholic faithful. The Revd Professor Diarmaid



ANDREA CHANCE



REUTERS

Damaged statue of the Virgin Mary, found in Qaraqosh, near Mosul, in December 2016, after the expulsion of IS fighters

*Reformation*, Allen Lane, 2016) writes of “a new genre of Roman Catholic Marian devotion, what might be styled cults of battered Marys”. He cites one in Valladolid, damaged in the English raid on Cadiz in 1596, which was renamed “*Santa Maria Vulnerata*”.

Damage of this kind is linked to images of the crucifixion. It serves as a reminder that the Virgin Mary — and through her intercessions, God — knows of our suffering within her own body, and that there is no need to explain or describe the pain or sorrow felt at times of crisis such as these.

MacCulloch, in his essay “The Virgin Mary and Protestant Reformers” (2004, reprinted in *All Things Made New: Writings on the*

## On Christ’s terms

**CAROLINE BROWNLIE, a retired priest in the diocese of Ely, has reflected further on the matter of spiritual communion:**

WE ARE material human beings, flesh and blood, and we need feeding, as recent trips to the supermarket have confirmed.

St John understands Jesus as saying to all of us: “My flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed” — at a time when

we are being asked by Mother Church to forgo our experience of that. God is asking us, in a way none of us has ever experienced since our baptism and confirmation, to believe in his presence and to trust that we can still receive him, on his terms, and not ours.

He is asking us, as he did the woman at the well, to trust in him as living water rather than as the actual water from a well. He is asking us to trust that, in worshipping him in spirit and truth, for as long as our Government and Church require us, we are not limited by human restrictions.

In the end, as the Gospels tell us, we “shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”.

Taking someone at their word is a very trustful thing to do in any relationship, as many of us know from experience.

That involves trusting that he is not limited by human circumstances. He will be as present to us, and feeding us as truly and in as life-giving a way as if we were all together at the communion rail.

If you overheard someone describing their friendship with another person as one of “spiritual communion”, you might envy them and wish you had such a relationship. As Christians, we are being given the opportunity to take God on trust, realising that we are being offered the opportunity to taste the life of heaven, which will be beyond bread and wine.