

Thought for the day: 20–26 April 2020

(by Geoff Oates, St Andrew's Lay Reader)

Monday 20 April

Heroes

Centenaries have been big news in the past few years. From the outbreak of the First Great War in 2014, the Battle of the Somme in 2016, Passchendaele in 2017, and, finally, the Armistice in 2018.

It led many people to go off in search of the family story behind the big events of the history books – to look for their own family heroes.

My dad's family were farmers. No great stories there. Exempt from conscription, discouraged from volunteering. Or, as we would call them today, the Key Workers. They fed a hungry nation through four years of supply-chain disruption - German U boats.



On my mother's side, there was a vague tradition that my grandfather had fought and been wounded at Passchendaele. As we searched more

thoroughly, a more prosaic story emerged. He was called up at the age of 17, saw action around Ypres in 1918, but was hospitalised and finally discharged from the army after contracting Spanish Flu.

A timely reminder that the centenaries did not end in November 2018, even if our commemorations did. A year later, and into 1920, an exhausted world was suffering from the second wave of the flu epidemic that killed more young men than the First World War.

The WWI centenaries have probably helped us as a nation to find a wider and more fitting understanding of heroism. We are still at risk of using the term a little too freely, but perhaps the present crisis will cure us of that. When history remembers the events of 2020, I trust it will honour the real heroes. Ordinary people who did what was needed from them, when they were asked, whatever the cost and whatever the risk.

Tuesday 21 April

When

Back in the 2008 financial crisis, a popular joke ran through the London banking world: 'In the interests of economy, the light at the end of the tunnel will be switched off'. Dark humour came naturally to us.

Hope is so much easier when the end is in sight. Reality is usually different. The tunnel of life is usually curved, the daylight at the end does not come into view until you are nearing the end.



In our lockdown days, the clamour from journalists (and, occasionally, opposition politicians) for a clear timeline for a return to 'normality' is perhaps a symptom of this.

Jesus used to have the same problem with his followers. As he proclaimed the coming Kingdom of God, they repeatedly asked him, 'When?'. What is the timeline? Their hope needed a focal point, a light at the end of the tunnel. Jesus doggedly refused to commit himself. The timing, he would tell them, is in my Father's hands. I trust him, I don't need to know. Neither do you. Get on with your lives.

It will come, he said, 'like a thief in the night'. A surprisingly dark metaphor for a wonderful promise. The good news will come when you are not expecting it. And, of course, that can also be surprisingly soon. The light may be nearer than you think, and certainly nearer than you fear.

Wednesday 22 April

Waiting

The Church calendar presents Lent, the weeks before Easter, as a time of waiting and preparing. But the biblical narrative is quite different. The weeks before Easter are full of frantic activity as Jesus and his growing band of supporters travel down to Jerusalem.

The waiting begins afterwards. The four Gospels give very different accounts of the weeks that follow the

Easter event, but John paints a picture that might speak best to our times. There is little sign of joy or hope, but rather uncertainty and fear. The disciples shut themselves away behind closed doors, lest the Jewish authorities come rounding up suspected accomplices (*John 20. 19*). They try to make sense of all that has happened, but they don't make much progress. It's easy for us, we've read to the end of the story. We already have a date for Pentecost. We know when their lockdown ends.

But, step-by-step, the disciples move forward. Locked doors cannot shut out our anxieties, but nor can they shut out our hopes. It is Jesus, and not the Jewish authorities, who appears among them with a greeting of peace, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.



As many of us have learned in the past weeks, the Grace of our Lord Jesus, the Love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit flow freely through the most unexpected new channels. When it is all over, stone walls, that have so often served as barriers as well as shelters to God's people, may look less important than we thought.

Thursday 23 April

Guilt

'What did you do in the Coronavirus crisis, daddy?' You'll recognise the original; that cruel, guilt-inducing recruitment poster from the First World War. I take no



credit for the update; I borrowed that from *Private Eye*.

Were you one of the heroes? The front liners in healthcare and residential home? The key workers who kept vital food and supplies moving, who kept public transport going? Or will your answer sound a bit less impressive?

Even my sister, a trained nurse now working part-time in post-natal care and looking forward to retirement, spoke of her sense of guilt when her colleagues were called back to the wards. Her own age and health conditions exempted her. Yet mental health and domestic abuse issues in young families were the bread and butter of her work, even in 'pretty' rural Hampshire. In the weeks of lockdown, the stresses are already showing. There are many 'front lines'.

I have the privilege (yes, it is a privilege) of working full-time. I sense the tensions that can arise between those who are kept busy and those who struggle to fill

time, either because they are furloughed or because the familiar social distractions have fallen away.

We experience the trials of the crisis in so many different ways. Few of us have any great choice in the matter. Nobody should feel guilty for themselves, and nobody should think less of others. 'What did you do in the Coronavirus crisis?' 'I kept myself safe and looked out for the safety of others'. That will be a perfectly satisfactory answer.

Friday 24 April

Grief

Last week I should have been enjoying a short break with my son Tom in Much Wenlock. Instead, we spent the days in Long Lockdown. Instead of steam railway festivals in Cheltenham and Bridgnorth, we've had the model railway in the shed.

It is tempting to brush off the disappointment. Is that really all I've got to be sorry about?

But much has been lost that cannot be fully retrieved. I think of schoolchildren and university students who will



lose critical chunks of their education. My own son Tom will miss his chance to study in the USA. Celebrations and life events can perhaps

be rearranged, but they will never be what they had been meant to be.

Things may have changed by the time you read this but, as I write, I can still say that no-one I know personally has died of Coronavirus. But that does not mean we have no need for grief.

Yes, we may smile and make the best of it, we may count our blessings (most of us still enjoy many of those), but do feel free to grieve, for whatever was close to your heart, and which you have been denied in these challenging weeks.

Saturday 25 April

Pigs

If I had to say what has cheered me most in these past weeks, it has been the re-institution of the good old-fashioned family walk, familiar from my childhood and from our own boys' younger days. The route is unvaried, well known since our arrival in Hertford, and endlessly fascinating once you walk with your eyes open. But one thing is new, and I am eternally grateful to my God. In a roadside field, just beyond Bramfield Road, there are pigs!

Sometimes cheerful, sometimes crotchety (depending, I suspect, on mealtimes), sometimes drowsy, sometimes lively, always inquisitive. They may not get a very good press in the Bible, but I always think of

Churchill's quip, 'Dogs look up to us, cats look down on us, pigs look us in the eye and treat us as equals'.



Seriously, as we question the risks and dangers of our hyper-connected world and economic (and agricultural) globalisation, it is comforting to see a working farm (there are sheep, cows and horses as well) just a few hundred yards from the front door.

We are dependent on God's creation – all that he gave us in those first verses of Genesis and declared to be good. It feels good to be closer to it, especially in these stressful times.

Sunday 26 April

An old man reflects

"I always try to look on the bright side," said the old man. "Yes, the lockdown is hard, but, you know, I often felt a bit isolated before it happened. So many people I used to be in touch with have just drifted away over the years, moved on. Too busy, new interests, new distractions. They have their lives to lead.

"But since this virus thing, I've started hearing from people who haven't tried to contact me in years. Even



from people who've never been in touch before at all. People whose parents or grandparents might have known me well.

"What do we talk

about? Well, some of them want answers. At least they seem to value wisdom and experience again. Some just want the comfort of sharing with someone who's been there before. Can I understand where they are coming from, these youngsters? Well, yes, I was young once, and I have a Son, I'm very close to him. He keeps me in touch with the world.

"You still get one or two people who seem to think it's all my fault. But not so many as there used to be. Anger is natural, and I understand the need to blame. I can handle it. I really don't mind what they have to say, as long as they are talking to me. Maybe I can help them back towards some kind of peace of mind, whatever they have suffered.

"But most people just want to check I'm still here. Of course I'm still here. I was here at the beginning, I'll be here at the end." (*Revelation 21. 6. I am Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End*)

PS If your image of God is female rather than male, please feel free to reimagine the above with different words at the beginning.