

Blogspot w/c 27 April

One more step along the way we go...

So we have completed five weeks of lockdown. The lockdown has been extended to 7 May. We still do not have a clear picture of how and when the restrictions on movement and gathering together will end. People and businesses are crying out for certainty as to how and when things may return to normal (whatever that may be). Is this a time for action, or for patience?

One thing is not negotiable. That is that we cannot do our own thing. The title of the Sydney Carter hymn from which the title of this piece is taken is "One more step along the way I go". But as Justin Welby stresses in his book "Reimagining Britain" one of the key values now and in the future must be solidarity. We have already seen too many examples of individuals arguing that the social distancing rules do not apply to them. I will be reviewing Welby's book in the next issue of the NUF magazine, *News & Views*.

One thing I only noticed when preparing this piece is that in many versions of the hymn the word "way" in the first line is replaced with "world". Coronavirus is a world-wide problem. We need to learn from the experience of other countries and in turn share our experience and expertise, especially with those developing countries most at risk from the virus.

Of course the hymn goes on to say:

...from the old I travel to the new...

We surely owe it to all those who have lost loved ones and all those who are working tirelessly to defeat the virus and its impact to ensure that we learn as much as we can from this terrible experience and ensure that the post pandemic world is better than what went before. The Archbishop of Canterbury said as much in his Easter message. But the temptation to get back to "normal" will be very great. We so easily push terrible traumas to the back of our minds. I will explore some of the reasons for this in the next issue of *News & Views*. But we will not be alone in this endeavour. As Sydney Carter reminds us:

...keep me travelling along with you.

Now ...

**... a three-act tragedy
plays out before
the eyes of watchers.
We are actors also.
Start; middle; end: but
how will normal
come back?
No one knows that.
We continue, follow
the script.
The play's the thing:
in the thick of it
we sink, swim.**

**We try
to be graceful on
our more pedestrian journey
through these times,
these strange times.
And like tall, straight blooms,
we must bend with what is,
and, post wind and rain,
rise, new.**

Liz Brownhill April 2020

“Public worship is not essential”

15/04/2020

So say the notices explaining why church buildings are closed because of the coronavirus pandemic. A blow to all of us for whom a virtual meeting is either impossible or unattractive because meeting face to face is a vital part of worship. And even for the anti-social the church building is a sacred space for private contemplation. But very few of us would question the need for closure at a time of acute danger to public health.

These comments may seem grudging when, in response to the pandemic, many churches and other places of worship have sought to continue worship by virtual means such as Zoom and YouTube. We are far more able to keep socially connected than were previous generations.

But there seem to be major constraints on virtual worship in the mainstream churches. No Christian group that I am aware of has given official sanction to the celebration of Mass or Communion by virtual means, though to some extent this may be happening unofficially. (Most Unitarians, of course, are not troubled by this issue.) On the other hand, the number of people participating, or at least viewing, worship by virtual means is very much greater than the number attending face to face services before the pandemic. Do religious practices therefore need to change?

I would suggest that they do. It seems the whole concept of “public” activity is changing, at least where the technology allows interaction and not just observation. This is now possible, not just with dedicated video-conferencing software like Zoom, but even with a (smart) television. An interactive “Songs of Praise” is no longer unimaginable. The technology need not be as intimidating as some of us have previously thought. If I can use Zoom you probably can too!

Such alternative forms of worship may enable us to address more effectively people’s needs for religious practice, permanently and not just while the pandemic lasts. After all, a church is not a building but rather the community of worshippers who (sometimes?) enter it.

Nick Saunders

For NUF weekly blog - A time for blame?

07/04/2020

Two weeks after lockdown. Deaths from covid-19 exceed 5,000. Ventilators and PPE are still in short supply. Testing of NHS staff has only recently begun. Criticism of the government's response to the virus is becoming strident. In popular tourist areas second home owners who left their main homes to take shelter from the virus are now hate figures. Such a critical approach may well be understandable at a time of fear for everyone. But how far, if at all, is it justified?

Constructive criticism of the official response is surely appropriate. Where knowledgeable commentators, whether politicians or scientists, identify errors or gaps in the official response they should point these out for all our sakes. Where groups of people congregate in clear breach of social distancing rules, they should be identified and punished, with penalties clearly indicating the seriousness with which society views their selfishness.

But it behoves all in authority to tread carefully. The police can only effectively preserve order and keep us safe if they work with the consent of the public. Some of the social distancing rules are unclear and have been interpreted differently by different police forces. Some punishments imposed have been arguably disproportionate, such as the confiscation of a car from a person driving into the country for exercise. Removing the daily exercise exemption would have a seriously adverse impact on physical and mental health. Other measures, such as increasing the fines for breach of the social distancing rules, should be used first before contemplating such a serious inroad into human rights.

As for the erection of social barriers by local communities, this could bring about the very worst sort of rule by gossip and prejudice, as happened in occupied countries in World War II. Who is to say why a resident brought her elderly mother into the village whose residents now threatens her with the police if she does not speedily return her to London? Who in this situation would automatically tell their aged relative to stay at home and accept the much greater risks in the metropolis? Whoever is without sin let him throw the first stone...

As Sir Paul Nurse, Director of the Francis Crick Institute, recently put it, while the government response may have been lacking in certain important respects, the time for dwelling on this in detail is not now. Now is the time for working together to beat the virus. There will be a time for a detailed examination of what happened and why and what should be done better next time. Because there most certainly will be another national, indeed international crisis which most of us will not have expected or planned for. I will be looking at the whole issue of learning from history in the Summer issue of *News & Views*. For now, let's just focus on all doing what we can for one another.

Persons of Purpose

In Amor Towles' *A Gentleman in Moscow*, the Count states firmly that all persons of purpose arise early. Certainly my mother never slept past 6a.m. once she reached 70. My wife gets up at 7.30 six days a week to go on her exercise bike and treadmill before breakfast. But how should we react when the covid-19 pandemic seems to have made most daily activities impossible or pointless? Should we not just roll over in bed and take a well earned rest?

I do find it strange that after many newspaper columns have been filled with articles advising us that to deal with daily stress we should take time out just to *be*, the same columns now contain articles advising us on the best ways to fill our time. Great ingenuity is being used to encourage us to self improve and to continue our social life through virtual means.

I suspect most NUF members have a plethora of inner resources and do not need the media to tell them how to use their increased free time. It is the younger generation who find it difficult to cope with the loss of structure given by school, college and university, and the money and social contact given by work and friends. But many NUF members will, like me, have projects they hold dear which are now impossible to pursue, at least for the time being. That can be very depressing.

My wife and I found it profoundly frustrating when, the evening before our landscapers were due to start remodelling our garden, they phoned to say they would not be able to start for the foreseeable future. It had taken a year and much effort to find a firm we could trust. Meanwhile I had done nothing in the garden as there was no point – the garden would be temporarily a battle ground when the digger went in. But after reflection I thought that it *was* now worth getting the garden tidy and even planting some annuals to brighten the garden and lift our spirits. And that was perhaps a symbol of the value of seeking positive experiences every day. My wife is sending “positivity messages” by e mail and Facebook to friends and contacts, especially those who are self isolating.

At NUF we are introducing this weekly blog for the same reason. Any NUF member who would like to share a positive thought should send it to our webmaster, John Wilkinson at johnwilk@ukunitarians.org.uk. We are very aware that some NUF members do not have access to the internet. If you know of anyone who is in this position please do print off the blog and share it with them.

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