

Lift up your hearts

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Chine McDonald continues our series

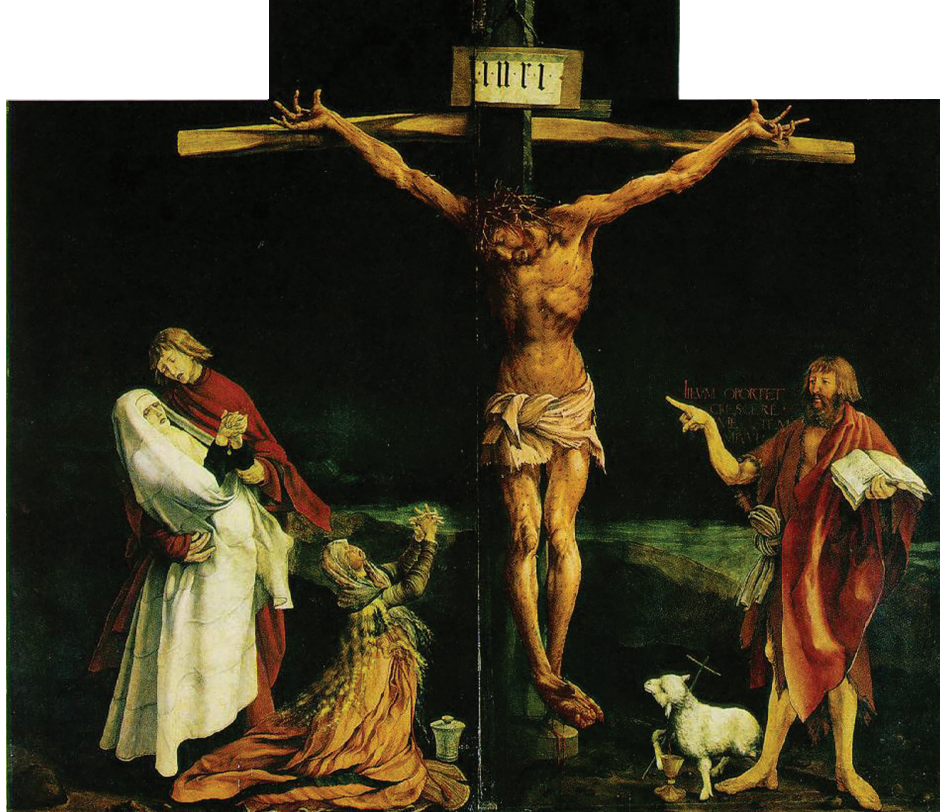
I AM finding it hard to connect with the idea that, for many of my friends and family, this is a time for rest, stillness, and recuperation. Some are finding that this is the moment to read the books and watch the films that they have simply not had time for in the busyness of normal life.

I envy them. For me, lockdown has involved almost an acceleration, and an increased intensity to the rhythm of my usual life. I feel busier and less rested than I have ever been.

Some of this is to do with the juggling act of having a toddler while running a household and doing a full-time job, as well as various extracurricular activities that are, in effect, work. There no longer seems to be any space between my work and my life, and — without the ritual of leaving the house, getting to the office, and sitting at a desk — my worlds have collided, leaving very little room to breathe.

Like all organisations, Christian Aid has been affected by Covid-19. I miss seeing my colleagues in real life, especially those who are leaving the organisation at this time. A virtual goodbye isn't the same as raising a glass in the pub. But Christian Aid has principally been occupied in responding to the needs of those poor and marginalised communities in which we work — those who were already facing extreme poverty and lack of healthcare, and living in conflict areas, before the pandemic struck.

I FOUND the first few weeks incredibly



difficult, with seemingly no let-up. There was little opportunity to leave the house. In between the online video calls, I had to attend to an ever-expanding to-do list. As life started to get increasingly intense, I made myself a promise to carve out some breathing-space. Most days, I now go on an hour-long walk at 5.30 a.m. This time is precious. This is the time when I listen to music, pray, and think.

There is something beautiful in the silence of the deserted streets; I feel as if I have the town all to myself. I'm starting to recognise the faces that I see on these daily walks: the supermarket worker, the man waiting at the bus stop, the man who cleans his car boot at exactly the same time every day. These faces remind me that, while all of us are in the most terrifying moment for a generation, life goes on and is still beautiful.

AT TIMES of crisis, I return to the **praise and worship music** that has sustained me throughout my life and given me hope in the difficult times. Every morning, as I step outside my door, I listen to a wonderful song, "Imela", meaning "Thank you" in my language of Igbo, from the south-east of

Nigeria. I don't speak much Igbo, but there is something that comes alive when I hear my native language.

Imela, Imela (Thank you, thank you)

Okaka, Oyenkeruwa (Great and mighty creator of the world)

Imela, Imela

Eze mo (My king)

Imela, Imela

Okaka, Oyenkeruwa

Imela, Imela

Eze mo

Oyendikagi (Who is like you?)

Ekene diri gi (All glory belongs to you)

We have a light box in our home — one of those white boxes where you can write messages. Although it is gimmicky and slightly cheesy, I try to make a point of writing a new motivational and hopeful message each week. In past weeks, we have moved from "Locked down but not out" to "Act, love, walk" (a reference to Micah 6.8); if I

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had enough of the right letters, the permanent fixture would be Julian of Norwich's "All shall be well", but I don't have enough Ls.

DURING these strange and devastating few weeks, I have kept thinking about Matthias Grünewald's **painting** *Crucifixion (overleaf)*. Completed in 1515, it can be found in the Isenheim altarpiece in Colmar, Alsace, in France, and depicts a diseased Christ on the cross.

Most famous paintings of the crucifixion picture a beautiful, serene — and white — Christ. The blood trickles tidily from his wound. But Grünewald's crucifixion is disturbing in its presentation of a gangrenous and sickly Messiah, a gruesome sight. It was painted for the Monastery of St Anthony.

The monks there cared for plague sufferers and those who had skin diseases such as ergotism. The earliest reference to the

disease, in 857, describes "a great plague of swollen blisters [that] consumed the people by a loathsome rot, so that their limbs were loosened and fell off before death".

Despite its horror, this image, to me, is perfect for our times. As a deadly virus causes death statistics so high that we can no longer comprehend them, I am reminded that Christ is with us, not standing aside, looking on at the pain and death, but suffering with those who suffer.

I AM dipping in and out of **books**, continuing to buy new ones while others pile up on my bedside table. In any spare moments that I can snatch, I am writing my own book — *God Is Not a White Man and Other Revelations* (Hodder Faith) — which is due out next summer. The death of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests have made issues of racial justice and faith ever more urgent.

I am finding solace and hope and righteous anger in the pages of the beautifully written *Between the World and Me*, by

Ta-Nehisi Coates. Framed as a letter to his son, it reads like a lament, but also a vision for a way forward. Knowledge of so much, for him, is gained through reading: "The pursuit of knowing was freedom to me, the right to declare your own curiosities and follow them through all manner of books. I was made for the library, not the classroom. The classroom was a jail of other people's interests. The library was open, unending, free. Slowly, I was discovering myself."

I keep returning to Mary Oliver's poem "Lead". In these days, we have been confronted with a suffering world more than we have in decades. In the heartbreak, my prayer is that I will be more compassionate, more loving, and more alive to the fragility and the beauty of life, and the importance of hope.

Chine McDonald is Head of Community Fund-raising and Public Engagement at Christian Aid.

Next week: Jemima Thackray

To kneel before one another

Marisa Rosie, who works with Syrian refugees, was struck by a newspaper story:

THE newspaper headline read: "White police officers and community members wash the feet of black faith leaders in North Carolina to 'express humility and love'." It is not the usual headline I would expect from the *Daily Mail*, but there it was.

The story was also in *The Sun*: "The Mayor of Cary, Lori Bush, said on Twitter that the ritual was a way 'to renew the cleansing that comes from Christ, and to seek and celebrate reconciliation with another.'"

Racism, prejudice, and injustice have been a hot topic in these recent weeks since the brutal, senseless murder of George Floyd. It seems that everywhere you turn there is anger and protests. All justified, but heart-wrenching to watch.

Reading how white policemen and -women knelt before a black pastor and his wife and washed their feet as a public demonstration of love, unity, and humility, spoke to me far more profoundly than all the demonstrations across America and in the UK.

I can hear some shout about the dangers of the coronavirus and not social distancing. But then I think about those who have



literally put their lives on the line for civil rights: Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X. They may not all have protested in peaceful or lawful ways, but history looks back on them as civil-rights champions.

Racism has always been a mystery to me. Maybe because my mum spent years overseas, and then I joined a mission where people from all nationalities worked together. I was so used to working with other races, travelling to countries in the Far East, India, and North Africa, that I can honestly say that I didn't notice skin colour or hear accents.

As a missionary, we would periodically wash one another's feet. It isn't the most

pleasant task, but it certainly connects you to a deeper spiritual meaning, and is most definitely humbling.

This is all unfolding in a month when Forth Valley Welcome, the charity I volunteer for, helping the integration of refugees, has won the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service. I, too, have been in the news, pictured with my Syrian family.

It fills my heart — not with pride but with a deep humility and sense of privilege. Not the "white privilege" that is talked about now, but the privilege of having friends from so many ethnicities and backgrounds. It brings a deep cleansing to the soul and a great enriching of life. That, figuratively, is also a washing of feet.

ALAMY