

# Lift up your hearts



Mark Williams continues our series

WHENEVER I ascend the stairs of the organ loft in Magdalen College Chapel, a wooden board listing the Organists of the College from 1480 reminds me of the small part that I play in a long story. Predecessors witnessed plagues, conflicts, and closures over the centuries (without the help of any technology), and yet the choral foundation endures. The comfort of this doesn't entirely mitigate the pain of separation from making music as part of the *opus Dei*, but it does at least provide some much-needed context.

Like many others', I imagine, my plans for cultural and intellectual stimulation during lockdown regressed from over-ambitious to decidedly modest, as I found my faculties severely diminished by countless hours of screen time. Having now admitted to myself that Proust will have to wait for another day, I have discovered a newfound love for **reading** short stories. A bit like deciding what to have for supper, with collections by Italo Calvino, Alice Munro, Saki, Ivan Turgenev, and Eudora Welty, plus several anthologies, picking out something that suits my mood and then settling down for half an hour or so has been enjoyable. That is often the most that I can handle after a day of teaching, marking exam scripts, meetings, and online rehearsals.

The recent anniversary of the death in



2014 of the Revd Dr John Hughes, a much loved colleague and friend, prompted me to dip once more into *Graced Life*, a collection of John's writings, edited by Matthew Bullimore and published in 2016. In *The Politics of Forgiveness*, an essay written in his final year as an undergraduate at Jesus College, Cambridge, where John later became Dean of Chapel, he speaks to challenges faced by all of us as we reflect on our part in historic and ongoing injustices: "The political process of forgiveness, while needing to be reciprocal to be successful, also demands that someone make the risky and costly step of taking the initiative to break the circle of recrimination and violence in order to get the circle to begin at all. Without such an initiative, the two sides will remain in a state of deadlock, waiting for the other to make the first move."

FOR hundreds of years, the Choir of Magdalen College, Oxford has ascended the

college tower at 6 a.m. on May Morning, to sing to assembled revellers gathered in the streets below. This year, I donned a shirt and tie over my shorts and flip-flops to conduct into a screen, kitchens were converted into recording studios, iPads were propped on top of piles of books, duvets were draped over hard surfaces, siblings stood on chairs to hold scores at eye level, and hundreds of hours were spent on editing, as choristers and academical clerks took part in a "Virtual May Morning". It has subsequently been viewed more than 200,000 times.

Researching the history of the tradition, I unearthed correspondence between one of my predecessors and William Holman Hunt, who painted the scene at the end of the 1880s. I used regularly to pass a version of Holman Hunt's **painting** *The Light of the World*, when I worked at St Paul's Cathedral; the original hangs in the chapel of Keble College, Oxford, just down the road from where I live now. As the locked door — of a cathedral, a church, a pub, a restaurant, a barber's shop, or a concert hall — has been one of the

abiding images of the past few months, it's useful, perhaps, as places begin to reopen, to remember that this particular door isn't locked: it's just waiting to be opened, if we are willing to hear His knock.

LISTENING to **music** has taken on a certain poignancy at a time when live music-making has stopped, and musicians, both professional and amateur, have been silenced by the pandemic. Each August, I would normally find myself in Portland, Oregon, celebrating the music of the Renaissance with friends and colleagues in the annual William Byrd Festival — but not this year.

Many of Byrd's motets speak of the pain and frustration of the recusancy and religious isolation that was the reality of his daily existence. *Quomodo cantabimus* draws its text from verses 4 to 7 of Psalm

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137 — “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” — and was written in response to a setting of the opening verses of the same psalm (“By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept”), sent to Byrd by the composer Philippe de Monte, Kappellmeister to the Holy Roman Emperor. Byrd’s answering motet, for the same number of voices in the same key, has an air of melancholy that is deeply affecting, but, with its contrapuntal brilliance and air of defiance at the words “Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom,” it is far from disconsolate.

His work serves as a reminder that Roman Catholic music, although hidden, was alive and well, and that the hope of deliverance from the Protestant yoke was fervently held, although it was more than 200 years before emancipation culminated in the Relief Act of 1829. Those of us who

long to “sing the Lord’s song” once again in our churches pray daily for a somewhat shorter wait before we can return to the choir stalls.

THE rhythm of daily evensong has been a constant in my life for many years, and — as absence makes the heart grow fonder — a reflection on what it is that I miss most has reminded me of the bits that too often go unnoticed. The second collect, for peace, is a **prayer** that calls on us — with God’s help — to pass our time in “rest and quietness”. While the pandemic has brought about a profound alteration in all our daily lives in one way or another, the need for genuine rest and quietness in the midst of heightened anxiety has never been greater:

“O God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed; Give unto thy servants that peace which the world cannot give; that our

hearts may be set to obey thy commandments, and also that by thee, we, being defended from the fear of our enemies, may pass our time in rest and quietness; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.”

My consumption of **television** has increased prolifically in these past few months, no doubt as a form of escapism. The hilarious *Schitt’s Creek*, on Netflix, is set in a small town characterised by its values of love, kindness, understanding, and inclusivity — something that we hope and pray the “new normal” might look like as we emerge from this time of isolation.

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Next week: *Carla Grosch Miller*

## A dark lake

**IT IS hard to believe that we have got so far through a crisis without drawing on Charles Dickens. Here, Esther Summerson, in *Bleak House*, recounts her slow recovery from smallpox, contracted while she nursed her maid Charley:**

I LAY ill through several weeks, and the usual tenor of my life became like an old remembrance. But this was not the effect of time so much as of the change in all my habits made by the helplessness and inaction of a sick-room.

Before I had been confined to it many days, everything else seemed to have retired into a remote distance where there was little or no separation between the various stages of my life which had been really divided by years. In falling ill, I seemed to have crossed a dark lake and to have left all my experiences, mingled together by the great distance, on the healthy shore. . .

While I was very ill, the way in which . . . divisions of time became confused with one another distressed my mind exceedingly. At once a child, an elder girl, and the little woman I had been so happy as, I was not only oppressed by cares and difficulties adapted to each station, but by the great perplexity of endlessly trying to reconcile them. I suppose that few who have not been in such a condition can quite understand what I mean or what painful unrest arose from this source.

For the same reason I am almost afraid



Esther Summerson, illustration for *Bleak House* by “Phiz”

intelligible I shall be. I do not recall them to make others unhappy or because I am now the least unhappy in remembering them. It may be that if we knew more of such strange afflictions we might be the better able to alleviate their intensity. The repose that succeeded, the long delicious sleep, the blissful rest, when in my weakness I was too calm to have any care for myself and could have heard (or so I think now) that I was dying, with no other emotion than with a pitying love for those I left behind — this

state can be perhaps more widely understood. . . .

I had heard my Ada crying at the door, day and night; I had heard her calling to me that I was cruel and did not love her; I had heard her praying and imploring to be let in to nurse and comfort me and to leave my bedside no more; but I had only said, when I could speak, “Never, my sweet girl, never!” . . .

By and by my strength began to be restored. Instead of lying, with so strange a calmness, watching what was done for me, as if it were done for some one else whom I was quietly sorry for, I helped it a little, and so on to a little more and much more, until I became useful to myself, and interested, and attached to life again.

to hint at that time in my disorder — it seemed one long night, but I believe there were both nights and days in it — when I laboured up colossal staircases, ever striving to reach the top, and ever turned, as I have seen a worm in a garden path, by some obstruction, and labouring again. I knew perfectly at intervals, and I think vaguely at most times, that I was in my bed; and I talked with Charley, and felt her touch, and knew her very well; yet I would find myself complaining, “Oh, more of these never-ending stairs, Charley — more and more — piled up to the sky, I think!” and labouring on again. . .

Perhaps the less I say of these sick experiences, the less tedious and the more