

Lift up your hearts

ADAM JÁN FIGEL/ALAMY



Martyn Percy continues our series

COLLEGES in Oxford, and cathedrals all over the country, are doing their best in these difficult and demanding times. I am at home with my wife, two sons, one son's girlfriend, and two stranded postgraduate student lodgers from the United States, who had to choose between pandemic management under Donald or Boris.

Before lockdown started, the girlfriend had visited us just once. As we now joke, she came for interview, and is now on an extended probationary period. We also have for company our dog, Lyra, and a cat, Topsy. The latter is not technically ours, but belongs to my mother. We are now in the sixth year of this generous "loan" arrangement. I only mention this because cats do not have owners; they have staff.

While we can hardly be said to be alone, it's all relative. Christ Church normally has nearly half a million visitors a year, to say nothing of the worshippers who pack into the cathedral. The Deanery — our home — hosts about 6000 people a year, for lunches, dinners, receptions, and meetings. Now, it is eerily quiet. We live right in the centre of Christ Church, in the heart of Oxford — and yet you can hear a pin drop.

MY FAVOURITE **painting** is a socially non-distanced crowd scene. Pieter Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary* (1564) is a riot of colours and carnival, and is complemented by the wintry hustle and bustle of his *Census at Bethlehem* (1566).

Many of Bruegel's paintings are colourful,



crowded, Dutch-Flemish peasant panoramas — weddings, games, and dances — into which subtle religious scenes have been woven. What Bruegel does is to paint Jesus into the heart of his communities, amid the drolleries of ordinary life. He often contrives to lose Jesus in the details. At times, finding Jesus in his pictures is a puzzle: a kind of 16th-century religious *Where's Wally?*

Bruegel does not allow for social distance between divinity and humanity, or Jesus and ordinary people. No surprise then, that my favourite **Bible passage** is the Prologue of John's Gospel: "The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us."

God chose to abide with us in our temporality and frailty, so that we might abide with God in eternity. This is the heart of revelation: God is "with" us. Indeed, that small word "with" may be one of the most underrated in the scriptures. God always chooses to stay with us: we do not walk alone. We are never abandoned or orphaned: we are loved and adopted.

I RARELY read novels, but I do have favourite **writers**. I love anything by Garrison Keillor — a masterclass of witty, droll, ethnographic fieldwork set in Minnesota among Lutherans, Brethren, and Roman Catholics. It's small-town stuff and yet all life is there. I have been hooked since

I first heard his radio broadcasts from *A Prairie Home Companion*.

For lockdown, however, you can't beat John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989). The novel is a homage to Günter Grass's fabulous *The Tin Drum* (1959).

Irving's novel is narrated by Owen Meany's friend, John Wheelwright. Meany is something of a miracle, and a vindication of the scriptural witness that says "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise" (1 Corinthians 1.27). That is Meany in a nutshell. He's a small boy who struggles through childhood with his enuresis and a squeaky voice. Yet his life is a vocation of singular preparation that reaches an epiphany of self-sacrifice. He saves others, but cannot save himself.

The novel excavates serious spiritual issues of faith, social justice, and fate (or, rather, the divine orchestration of fulfilled vocations), set against an almost right-wing, racist-like force of hatred. The story is an absurd, outlandish narrative, with quirky and ironic humour and a pronounced left-wing social conscience.

"The night she died, Dan found her propped up in her hospital bed; she appeared to have fallen asleep with the TV on and with the remote-control device held

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in her hand in such a way that the channels kept changing. But she was dead, not asleep, and her cold thumb had simply attached itself to the button that restlessly roamed the channels — looking for something good.

“At the time, in 1989, it seemed a fairly unusual way to die. Nowadays, I suspect, more and more people are dropping off that way. And we’re still looking for something good on television. We won’t find it. There’s precious little on TV that can keep us awake or alive. Ever the prophet, Owen Meany was right about television, too.”

SPEAKING of **divine orchestration**, any jazz, from bossa nova (e.g. Stan Getz) to the era of ’50s and ’60s “cool” school will do for me. The easiest, most refreshing album that I listen to is Miles Davies’s *Kind of Blue*. Released 60 years ago, it’s a benchmark of improvisation and composition in jazz: mellow and mild; euphoric and exhilarating.

I’m very choosy about the **films** that I watch for pleasure. I have to see a fair number on behalf of the British Board of Film Classification, with whom I have

worked for the past seven years on sensitive and contentious grading issues. I have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly — all in a small private studio cinema in Soho.

Colin Firth’s struggles in *Hour of the Pig* (1993) are comical. He plays a lawyer acting for a pig on trial for witchcraft in medieval France, against the backdrop of plague and brothels. The film that I would watch almost any day is the idiosyncratic *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000): a crime-comedy-drama from Joel and Ethan Coen. It’s “loosely based” on Homer’s *Odyssey*, and has terrific gospel and bluegrass music. Like *Owen Meany*, it deals with journeys and fate, and is powerfully vindicating.

COMMON to these choices is the indivisibility of secular and sacred. Just like night and day, light and dark — all are the same to God (Psalm 139.12). All of this might explain my choice of **prayer** (if not opting for the timeless BCP Collect for Purity): “Prayer for Many Gifts” by Stephen Cherry (Dean of King’s College, Cambridge).

Give me, O Lord,
a calm soul and a clear head,

a broad mind and a generous
spirit.

Give me,
a warm heart and a listening ear,
my true voice and a gentle touch.

Give me,
a hunger for justice and a thirst
for peace,
a passion for truth and a love of
mercy.

Give me,
a painter’s eye and a poet’s
tongue,
a saint’s patience and a prophet’s
hope.

Give me,
a sage’s wisdom and a fool’s
delight,
a pilgrim’s purpose and an angel’s
content.

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Dean of Christ Church, Oxford.*

Next week: Pádraig Ó Tuama

You will rest in us

GIVEN the troubling news from the United States, it is perhaps a week to recall that one of the Fathers of the Church, St Augustine of Hippo, was African. He was born in what is now Algeria, in 354, and returned to become bishop there. He died in 430.

His *Confessions* were written when he was in his mid-forties, in part to stop his enemies using his past against him. Near its end, he sums up the wonders of God’s universe — still with an eye to his critics — combining theological arguments with spiritual observations.

YOUR works praise you that we may love you, and we love you that your works may praise you. They have a beginning and an end in time, a rise and a fall, a start and a finish, beauty and the loss of it. They have in succession a morning and an evening, in part hidden, in part evident. They are made out of nothing by you, not from you, not from some matter not of your making or previously existing, but from matter created by you together with its form — that is, simultaneously. For you gave form to its formlessness with no interval of time

between. The matter of heaven and earth is one thing, the beauty of heaven and earth is another. You made the matter from absolutely nothing, but the beauty of the world from formless matter. . .

And because particular things are good and all of them together very good, we have seen in your Word, in your unique Son, heaven and earth. . .

The seventh day has no evening and has no ending. You sanctified it to abide everlastingly. After your very good works, which you made while remaining yourself in

repose, you rested on the seventh day. This utterance in your book foretells for us that, after our works which, because they are your gift to us, are very good, we also may rest in you for the sabbath of eternal life.

There also you will rest in us, just as now you work in us. But you, Lord, are always working and always at rest. Your seeing is not in time, your movement is not in time, and your rest is not in time.

*Confessions, translated by Henry
Chadwick (OUP, 1991)*



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