

HOLY INNOCENTS FALLOWFIELD

A meditation for Good Friday



Common Decency: the human response to plague

Last year, we shared some reflections on an unusual Triduum by focusing on the lives of the nursing order of nuns in the Hospices de Beaune, founded in the 15th Century, to provide us with parallels for our Holy Week.

This year we revisit them as a focus for our time of thought and meditation.

It will consist of an introductory vocal piece, and end with another.

Psalm 88 will be sung at a midway point. A quotation from either a biblical or secular source is read aloud, and then a piece of instrumental music is played.

During this time, the words about the history of plague and illness and their effects on human beings and human society can be read.

Music: O Love that will not let me go (Libby Tringham, Hilary Jones)

"...there's no question of heroism in all this. It's a matter of common decency. That's an idea which may make some people smile, but the only means of fighting a plague is - common decency." Albert Camus

Music: Louis Couperin (c1626-61) Sarabande in D minor (Michael Ainsworth)

Every year, thousands of visitors go to see the Hotel Dieu in Beaune, Burgundy. The 'Hospices' as it is known is a strange building, combining striking architectural features – just imagine a roof tile coming off – and an odd amalgamation of connections and purposes. The Hospices produce their own wine, which is auctioned each year at silly prices. It is a Patrimoine Mondial site, open to the public nearly every day of the year. It has a church, a pharmacy, offices, a well and permanent displays. But until the early 1970s, it was a hospital.

It was opened in 1433 and was the brainchild of Nicolas Rollin, career politician. It was paid for by the stupendous fortune brought to the marriage by his third wife, Guigone de Salins. They were a united and focused couple – the hospital was their mission, their legacy and their witness to their faith.



A time of silence is followed by:

Dean Tait

Quite put aside were any thoughts of the state of the Cathedral roof
Instead, a quiet agony, waiting for the stethoscope's final figure of eight,
and the click of the doctor's bag. He never thought there could be this routine to death: the
prayer book, the size of his palm;
his wife, half in doubt because of the fever, hiding the sick-room drawings away;
and at their prayers each day in a borrowed house,
they tested the Bible texts against a silent nursery.

(A poem by David Scott, based on the episode in the life of the then Dean of Carlisle Cathedral, later Archbishop of Canterbury, who in the course of a week lost five of his daughters to scarlet fever.)

Music: Herbert Howells (1892-1983) 'My Lord Sandwich's Dreame', from Lambert's Clavichord (op.41, 1927) (Michael Ainsworth)

Each year could bring plague of some sort. Not necessarily Bubonic or pneumonic plague but It seemed to depend on the seasons. A wet autumn, with a poor harvest made people hungry and susceptible to illness. A winter where the weather was either not too cold, damp, windy and variable, wore people down. Then a bug would strike – a 'suetette' of illness, going through the region like another wind, taking the poor, the tired and the vulnerable with it. Burgundy, with its farms, fields and vineyards was a rich and successful land. Guigone's family were among the world's leading producers of salt at the time. If the plagues hit the poor, good workers and their families could be the decimated ones as could the indigent poor. Life was fragile. You could, as they said, be fine at breakfast time and dead by dinner. Where earthly life was so often so short, a nodding acquaintance with death as a reality was a part of life, as was a belief in a life to come. And winter months – January and February – were frequently the times of illness.

The 'Grande Salle des Povres' – the iconic hospital ward in a church, with the beds lined up down the side, rather like a train carriage, so that patients could see the altar from their pillows, would be full to bursting. The nursing approach varied according to how the illness progressed: either taking people who were ill into the ward in order to build them up to resist infection, to keep them warm and clean or, taking in those who were critically ill, for end-of- life care. They lay in comfortable beds, looking at works of art on the walls, in a place of light and air, treated with respect.



A time of silence us followed by:

“Have mercy on me, O Lord, in your kindness. In your compassion, blot out my offense. Wash me, O God, from the stain of my guilt, and cleanse me from my sin.” Psalm 51

Music: Thomas Tallis (c1515–85), Third Mode Melody (Michael Ainsworth)

The notable details, such as the use of brine and vinegar as antiseptic and antibacterial cleaning agents, the use of metal bowls for washing rather than wooden ones, the use of pottery and metal containers rather than wooden boxes or leather, and in the end the use of glass, and particularly the use of soaps and endless hot water made this hospital notable. This was medicine led by science, not superstition, or the view that illness was a punishment for sin.

These were hard-working nuns. Their action was their prayer. There seem to be no spaces set aside for contemplation. Indeed, their order was dedicated to St Martha – leaving no room for misunderstanding. The offices of the church punctuated their work in the main ward – not so much a consultant’s rounds, as a priest arriving to say Mass, or some of the sisters taking a break to lead one of the offices. Those who recovered, recovered enough to be able to get out of their beds to sit in the middle of the chapel to eat, or talk to others, or to take part in services. Those who were dying, saw the cross of Christ before them from their beds, they were anointed and given holy communion and the last rites of the church to see them on their way. The sisters, often the daughters of aristocratic or upper middle-class families, were not enclosed or made to take permanent vows. Some served the community and trained as nurses for several years and then left to marry, or to run their own households. Many became experts and moved on to train other nurses, both lay and professed.

A time of silence follows. Then:

“Nurses are always there. You care for us from the earliest years. You look after us in our happiest and saddest times. And for many, you look after us and our families at the end of our lives. Your dedication and professionalism are awe-inspiring.”

Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, in a speech to the RCN.

Music: J.S. Bach (1685–1750), Sarabande in G minor, BWV 839 (Michael Ainsworth)

For high days and holy days, the red hangings for each bed were brought out. They offered privacy – if patients were allowed out of bed to socialise, they went to sit in the middle of the room. The nursing nuns and their assistants came to each patient from the other side of the bed, removing sheets, dressings, items used for treatment and waste to be washed, cleaned or disposed of. The visitor to the hospices passes from the **Salle des Pauvres** past the smaller wards to the enormous kitchens, the other heart of the building.

You can imagine how hot it must have been – boiling water for cleaning, making soap, as well as preparing food for the nuns and their patients.

The house never stopped – nor did its dependencies: the farms providing milk, fruit, vegetables and meat, as well as the vineyards and their wine and vinegar, the drays that brought salt and other supplies for a busy working hospital.

The habits of Holy Week became ingrained over the years. The nuns would often have been at their busiest during Lent – falling in early spring or late winter it was often marked by plagues and fevers. The nuns lived Holy Week in their work: as it progressed, gradually the fires, candles and lights would go out. By Holy Thursday, there was no cooking, the last soup was given to the patients, and the nuns ate up the old bread, soaked in milk.

The altars were stripped, statues shrouded.

Psal|m 88 (Joanna Gait, Hilary Jones, Andy Gait)



O Lord, God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before you. Let my prayer come into your presence; incline your ear to my cry.

For my soul is | full of troubles; my life draws near to the | land of death.
I am counted as one gone down | to the Pit; I am like one that | has no strength,
Lost among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave,
Whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.

You have laid me in the | lowest pit, // in a place of darkness in | the abyss.
Your anger lies heav | y upon me, // and you have afflicted me with | all your waves.

You have put my friends far from me and made me to be abhorred by them. I am so fast in prison that I cannot get free; my eyes fail from all my trouble.

Lord, I have called daily upon you; I have stretched | out my hands to you. // Do you work wonders | for the dead? Will the shades stand | up and praise you? // Shall your loving-kindness be declared in the grave, your faithfulness in the land | of destruction?

Shall your wonders be known in the dark or your righteous deeds in the land where all is forgotten?

But as for me, O Lord, | I will cry to you; early in the morning my prayer shall | come before you. // Lord, why have you reject | ed my soul? Why have you hidden your | face from me?

I have been wretched and at the point of death from my youth; I suffer your terrors and am no more seen. Your wrath sweeps over me; your horrors are come to destroy me; all day long they come about me like water; they close me in on every side.

Lover and friend have you put far from me and hid my companions out of my sight.

A time of silence follows: then.....

"I am the way that leads the exile home; I am the truth that sets the captive free; I am the life that raises up the dead; I am your peace, true peace my gift to you. I am the Lamb that takes away your sin; I am the gate that guards you night and day; You are my flock; you know the shepherd's voice; You are my own; your ransom is my blood."

Music: J.S. Bach (1685–1750), Sarabande in G minor, BWV 839 (Michael Ainsworth)

On Good Friday, the patients were fortified with wine and sausage, while the nuns fasted for part of the day. In the church, the liturgy of Good Friday was kept, and the nuns and lay nurses would use the last of the hot water to clean everywhere. The kitchens, especially the copper saucepans and utensils were scoured, candle stands and woodwork cleaned and polished, altar linens washed, aired and ironed. The patients who could be moved were turned out of bed and their beds changed and cleaned, the red hangings put up and brushed. One of the diaries from the mid 1600s, speaks of a group of elderly people who had clearly been given seats in the sunny courtyard, while their beds were re-made and the chapel prepared for Easter Day. Holy Saturday was downtime... In some years, however, it is recorded that Easter went on beyond the walls of the Hospices – as sickness continued, as more patients arrived, as, despite expert care and all the medical knowledge available at the time, people died of their illnesses and social isolation was occasionally a necessity.

These habits, in these days, when the climatic and seasonal signs we associate with Easter are all around us, like those Burgundian nuns before us we are trying to keep ourselves and others free of infection at the same time as we try to keep the Triduum. Our cleaning and preparing become the constant cleaning of surfaces, the washing of our hands, the cleaning of our personal spaces, and care in other spaces. Like the nuns, in a busy Holy Week, our 'patients' are the people all over the world, they are the people we are keeping away from in order to protect them, in spite of vaccines and treatment regimes.

A time of silence is followed by:

*Christ is my life, to die is my gain to him I surrender myself, with joy I depart,
With joy I depart from here to Christ, my brother,
so that I may come to him and be with him for ever
Now I have overcome affliction, suffering, anxiety and distress;
through his five holy wounds I am reconciled with God
When my strength breaks, my breathing becomes difficult and I can no more say a word:
Lord, accept my sighs!
When my heart and thoughts fade away like a light, that must flicker as the flame fails:
Then gently and calmly, Lord, let me fall asleep according to your plan and wish,
when the hour of my death comes.
And let me stick to you like a burr to cloth
and live forever with you in heaven's joy and bliss.
Amen, that you will, Christ, grant me mercy!
Arm me with your spirit so that I may go in blessed calm and peace.*

A translation of "Christus der ist mein Leben" (Anon)



Music: Thomas Tomkins (1572–1656) Voluntary, from Musica Britannica (Michael Ainsworth).

*It has been said repeatedly in the past year,
that this is a time that has rocked the world.
Things are not the same and may never be the same again.
In our prayers today we always pray for those at the point of death
and those who watch over them.
Perhaps we should also add those who watched over them at a distance
and mourn them at a distance.
There have been so many people who have seen the death of loved ones,
patients or neighbours – expected or unexpected.
Around the world, we see towns and cities,
villages and communities coming slowly back to life
as illness fades away and life and health return.
Together, we turn towards resurrection.*

Out of death, life,
out of darkness, light,
out of fear, courage,
out of sorrow, joy.

Morning glory, starlit sky: (Vanstone/Rose; Holy Innocents Choir)

Morning glory, starlit sky,
soaring music, scholar's truth
flight of swallows, autumn leaves
Memory's treasure, grace of youth;

Open are the gifts of God
Gifts of love to mind and sense;
Hidden is love's agony,
Love's endeavour, love's expense.

Love that gives, gives ever more,
Gives with zeal, with eager hands,
Spares not, keeps not, all outpours,
Ventures all, its all expends.

Drained is love in making full;
Bound in setting others free;
Poor in making many rich;
Weak in giving power to be.

Therefore he who shows us God
helpless hangs upon the tree
and the nails and crown of thorns
Tell of what God's love must be.

Here is God, no monarch he,
Throned in easy state to reign;
here is God, whose arms of love
Aching, spent, the world sustain.