

As I write the term “lockdown” has been leant a curious resonance by the events on Clapham Common.

Pandemic days have afforded us all the opportunity to see things in different lights, some bright, some blindingly so, yet others faint and flickering, to the point it feels they might be extinguished.

Darkness will not vanquish the light. It is right to protest. To make noise. Silence is the real killer.

That’s a thought worth holding onto as we inch closer to Easter and imagine the impact of rolling great stones back, stones which obscure and trap, seal the fate, so to speak.

I wonder what we will say this Easter as people of a new dawn. Maybe more importantly I wonder how we will feel? Will we dare feel, or will we hope that the familiarity of the event will carry us through to that curious Monday when everything should have changed, but usually hasn’t. Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Blue Monday!

As for the familiar, well, truth to be told that has been long banished and I’m not persuaded it will ever return, at least not in the manner we sometimes assume or crave.

Does the familiar make us feel safe?

Sometimes, maybe. When I step into the kitchen in my Mum’s house ... yep I feel safe there, for the moment. But that may change; I don’t know. It’s been a while. I have been well and truly banished from my homeland.

I recently felt safe in the very unfamiliar setting of a hospital where I experienced the unknown, yet the presence of people (all women) who communicated care and concern. Safe in the unfamiliar, on my back, staring at the ceiling!

The French for Heaven is Ciel. I can still see the ceiling tiles; they were grimy. Funny what you can see in the unfamiliar, what you notice and hold onto. Heaven tiles! I tried counting them, but soon thought better.

Soon we’ll be back; back together ... back to church ... back to the ?????????? future?

What if I said, I’m not sure I want to go back?

More honestly:

What if I said, I’m not sure I can go back?

Are these forbidden questions and thoughts? Have I dared to eat from the tree in the garden with the danger signs plastered all over it? Have I been speaking with snakes, or worse listening to women with loose tongues? Ringing a few bells?

Nope. Listening to myself ... tuning into the signals from within. Reception is not always good, but on a good day I can hear quite well. Crackle but no pop!

I know the temptation (back to the snake!) is to ask all the drearily obvious questions that arise when we consider our return from Exile, back to the promised land of Hallowell Rd! HA6!

Will it feel like my Mum's kitchen? Will it feel safe? I worry that I might just feel I'm back to borrowed time, pushing against the inevitable and casting such endeavour as a virtue.

After this year, the unexpected journey, I'm beginning to feel I might miss the journey itself. I'm not sure I have felt exiled, more that I belonged in the unpredictable ebb and flow of hopes, dashed by set backs; eloquence countered by stony silence. Wonder tempered by death; fears by love.

I've been conscious of a litany of lies and ineptitude, but I've also savoured the revelation of things which feel honest and true, stuff you'd never experience in the normal. The extremes have been exhausting, yet nutritious. Hunger, quails and manna. And too much wine.

I'm just not sure I can go back to the regular 7th day blast of hope springing eternal, keeping the troops happy, before coffee is served. Moses, could you lend me your brazen serpent? Would that help keep those mutinous thoughts at bay?

Over the years I've quoted from the theatre director, Peter Brook's "The Empty Space". I first came upon his work over 30 years ago when I was studying Divinity in Edinburgh. I was mesmerised by his celebration of the new space of Coventry Cathedral, while noting this sacred space required a new ceremony lest it be simply an empty space ...

"... those Ancient & Modern Hymns, charming perhaps in a little country church, those numbers on the wall, those dog collars and the lessons – they are all sadly inadequate here. The new place cries out for a new ceremony, but it is the new ceremony that should have come first."

(Peter Brook The Empty Space Pelican 1972)

I've been rereading the book. It should be prescribed reading for anyone with responsibility for public worship.

Brook concludes:

"As you read this book, it is already moving out of date. It is for me an exercise, now frozen on the page. But unlike a book, the theatre has one special characteristic. It is always possible to start again. In life this is a myth: we ourselves can never go back on anything. New leaves never turn, clocks never go back, we can never have a second chance. In the theatre the slate is wiped clean all the time.

In everyday life, 'if' is a fiction, in the theatre 'if' is an experiment.

In everyday life, 'if' is an evasion, in the theatre 'if' is the truth

When we are persuaded to believe in this truth, then the theatre and life are one.

This is a high aim. It sounds like hard work. To play needs much work. But when we experience the work as play, then it is not work any more.

A play is a play

(Now reread this passage but replace the word theatre with church)

I have long said the biggest word in faith isn't God, it's 'if'. If God, then what ...?

Soon our theatres and our churches will be open.

Business as usual?

I hope not.

That would be the most terrible denial of the last 12 months.
We can do better than that, and we must.

So, what if ...

James