A leading Dominican on life in lockdown Britain

by Timothy Radcliffe

A Christian prays at the locked door of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem’s Old City on Palm Sunday

Photo: CNS, Debbie Hill

A former head of the Dominican order suggests how we might we use these days of waiting and hoping to change the way we structure our lives. There is an opportunity to let go of the past with its burdens, be open to the future with its promises, and live each moment as it comes.

At midday we sang “How long, O Lord?” (Psalm 13). Before Covid-19, when I sang those words I used to think of my brothers and sisters in Iraq: how long will their suffering go on, decade after decade? Now they are the words in all our mouths. How long, O Lord, will this pandemic continue?

NHS staff and GPs must wonder how long they will have go on working draining hours, risking their lives. How long must those working in supermarkets, in transport and the post, and other essential areas, have to be...
dangerously close to other people? How long can parents locked in with young children stay patient and loving? How long before grandparents can enjoy their grandchildren again? How long before I get the result of my test for the virus? How long shall I live?

Even in my spacious priory in Oxford, I ask, “How long, O Lord” before I see again the faces of those I love. Skype and Zoom are not the same. How long before I hold and hug those who are dearest to me – if ever?

A short absence sharpens anticipation but when it is prolonged, it gnaws at our humanity. In Amélie Nothomb’s novel, Soif, Jesus delights in thirst. “Having panted with thirst for a while, don’t drink the goblet of water straight down. Take a mouthful, keep it in your mouth before swallowing it. Measure how marvellous it is.” But on the cross, this thirst becomes horrific and all-engulfing.

Usually we estimate “how long” by reference to the calendars that structure our time: family gatherings, the seasons of our faith, school and university terms, sporting events. But what structures our time now? It is shapeless, which makes it hard to endure. “The time is out of joint,” as the troubled Hamlet observed. We seem to have been living with the virus for years rather than weeks.

A friend wrote to me: “The news makes me feel worse but without it there is a sense that I might be missing something. Lockdown makes me nervous of the outside world but claustrophobic too.” I have a pile of books I have long wanted to read. Now I have the time, but I cannot settle down to it. The temptation is just to keep sending and answering emails and tuning in to the news.

The answer to that cry, “How long, O Lord?” is not a date in a diary, but a way of living in time. Martin Luther King was asked how long his people would be oppressed. “However difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long because truth pressed to the earth will rise again … How long? Not long because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice … He has sounded forth the trumpets that shall never call retreat. He is lifting up the hearts of men before His judgement seat. Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him. Be jubilant my feet. Our God is marching on.”

“Not long” – but not because there is a date when prejudice will be over, but because King had learned to live each day with hope. St John Henry Newman said a Christian is someone who waits for Christ and so is already touched by his coming. On Low Sunday in 1945, when the Gestapo came to take Dietrich Bonhoeffer away to be executed, he just had time to whisper a final message to a fellow prisoner to be relayed to his friend, Bishop Bell of Chichester: “This is the end, but for me the beginning … Our victory is
So when our habitual calendars are shredded and we have no idea when this pestilence will pass, the secret is to live our days as shaped by hope. The Baptist theologian, Ian Stackhouse, makes a startling claim: “It seems to me that the battle for civilisation will pivot on the outrageously simple challenge of living a day well.” This, he believes, is the gift of the Liturgy of Hours.

Both of my parents discovered the life-giving rhythm of the breviary. A member of the Dominican laity, imprisoned for his career as a hitman for the Mafia, told me he had become like a nun, reciting his office morning, noon and night. People may find other rhythms more fruitful. A friend of mine, a GP imminently to be unretired, structures her day around family, running, gardening, music and poetry. We are rediscovering the joy of “the regular life”. I have not lived such a regular life since I was a novice!

What does a well-lived day look like? The Liturgy of the Hours is shaped so that we can let go of the past with its burdens, be open to the future with its promises, and so live in the now. It gives us hints of how all of us who are stuck at home may structure our days so as to live in hope. The liturgy of each hour, except midday and the Office of readings, has a canticle that invites us to live that moment of the day. In Genesis 1, the day begins in the evening, as it does still for all great feasts. John Donne calls darkness “light’s elder brother”. The dawn comes as an awaited gift. To prepare ourselves for the new day, in the evening and at night, we must let go of the past, with its burdens and resentments.

Shut up with other people, in a family or a shared flat or even in a religious community, burdens are bound to accumulate and tensions intensify. In Lockdown Britain, after a few weeks together, murderous thoughts will bubble to the surface. In Wuhan, when the restrictions were lifted, the divorce rate shot up. The Magnificat at Vespers is the song of a young woman who remembers with gratitude the great things that the Lord has done for her. How else could she face the future?

How can we mark each day with gratitude for the graces given, and even for the people who might at that very moment be driving us crazy? We need to find times to give thanks, even when we cannot go to the sacrament of Thanksgiving, the Eucharist. More people are now coming to Mass online at Blackfriars than ever came in the flesh.

Last thing at night, at Compline, we are invited to let go of the day, and even of our lives. Like old Simeon we sing: “At last, all-powerful Master, you give leave to your servant to go in peace, according to your promise” (Luke 2:29). St Paul tells us: “Do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26).
It is the time to cleanse our minds of the hurts of the day so that we can be at peace with each other. One way or another, we need a daily act of mutual forgiveness, a healing of wounds. Otherwise, we shall not sleep.

The morning is the time of new beginnings. It is in the morning that the Risen Christ appears in the garden. Every Lauds is an invitation to be open to the Lord’s promise. The canticle is the Benedictus, in which Zechariah sings of his child, the future John the Baptist:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.
Luke 1:76-7

Children are the promise of the future. During the genocide in Rwanda, one of the brethren wept with me because all that he loved was being destroyed. The following Christmas he sent me a photograph of himself with two fat babies. On the back he had written: “Rwanda has a future.”

Midday Office has no canticle. It invites us to face the toughest challenge: to live now, rather than be trapped in the past or to lunge after the future. Jesus was a man who lived each day as it came. He is walking through a village when he sees little Zacchaeus up the tree. “Zacchaeus,” he tells him, “make haste and come down, for I must stay in your house today” (Luke 19:5). He grabs the moment. “Today, salvation has come to this house, for he is also a son of Abraham.”

Waiting for the lockdown to be over may be the hardest thing we shall ever do. Already I am longing to break out of isolation and take a walk in the gardens of Oxford. But I hear the voice of Abba Moses, the desert father, reminding me: “Sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.”

The Lord is coming. How long? Not long!