

The Chaplain's Reflection for Sunday 14th June 2020

This week, I went to the GP for a routine blood test. I was a 'green patient' and moved through the practice on the green route. I was classified green because in terms of the COVID-19 virus I am privileged - as a white woman under 60 with no underlying health conditions, I am low risk; I may be a bit overweight, but otherwise in this particular life lottery, I am doing well. I am also aware that I have been living through this time in a house with plenty of space inside and out, with family whom I love, and who are all adults able to pull their weight in the cooking, shopping, cleaning – though sadly all deficient in any gardening skills. I am well aware that I am fortunate, and I count my blessings.

My life has not always been so easy, and I learnt young that life is not fair. However, compared to many, I have always been privileged by my white skin, my access to a good education, and capacity to find support and understanding when I most needed it. Arriving at college in Cambridge from a girls' state school when women had only recently been admitted and the percentage of independent schools was considerably high was, at times, a very challenging experience. Yet, navigating that led to more privilege; having been to Cambridge has added a serious layer of privilege to my life.

Over these last weeks, we have been shocked and challenged again at the unfairness of a world that treats people differently due to the colour of their skin. We have been, quite rightly, reminded that racism is part of the history of the institutions we live and work in and that it continues to infect realities of our present. We have seen and heard how racism at its worst is violent and deadly. We have heard the voices for change. We know that we have to do better. We have noted that here and in the USA, Covid-19 has had a disproportionate impact on black and Asian people, both in terms of death and disease and in job losses and space issues. We need to learn how to address these inequalities in life opportunities.

We have come to Oxford from different backgrounds, with different privileges shaping our lives. All of us are now shaped by the experience of being at Oxford, with all of the opportunities that brings.

This service is the last of this very strange term, and the last of this academic year. It is our leavers' service, but not as any of us had hoped or planned it to be. From our different spaces, we have recorded our contributions and tuned in to listen, and I and many are so grateful to all of you who have made these virtual Chapel services possible. We have and are experiencing events that we had never imagined, and the future is unclear. Some of you will be leaving Trinity, and it is really sad that there will be no parties, and lazy afternoons on the lawns, no schools' dinners and Commemoration Ball. No glass of sparkling wine after this service in the quad before a final Sunday night formal. I am aware that this is a very strange time to leave university, moving into jobs which will most likely begin with working from home: a continuation of online meetings, trying to build relationships with people you have not met in person. Some of you are not sure what comes next, and many of the ways in which people have used this post-university time are not presently possible. We hope that you will find good opportunities for meaningful ways to explore the future.

The rest of us are thinking about what next term will look like. How will College life function with physical distancing and no large gatherings? How will we welcome in Freshers to this strange world? Will the Choir be able to sing again in Chapel?

So much uncertainty, so much turmoil. In this complex, changing world, we need to find our feet and discern our way. We need to think about the values that will guide us. What will we learn in response to this pandemic? Can we truly value our NHS, the people who provide care, who do the jobs we have often failed to notice? Can we hold onto the importance of keeping in touch even when we cannot touch, and of neighbourliness to those we know and those we do not know but act to protect? We have learnt that we have to address the inequalities in health. We are being rightly challenged to talk honestly about race, about our history and about our future. We need to understand our own privileges. We need to think about who and what we honour, how we understand and commemorate our history, whose voices we listen to and how we can have educated, honest conversations about racism and other forms of discrimination.

As the reading from Proverbs reminds us, for all of this we need wisdom. We are not to withhold good if we have the power to show it to others, not to contend with or do evil to our neighbours. We are to work for good in our world, as the Philippians reading reminds us, to focus on truth, honour and justice. If we focus on these things, we may not end up with material riches, but we will end up with the riches that sustain us through turbulent times: friendship, kindness, and integrity.

All of us have the immense privilege of the education we have received in this incredible College and University. We have, I hope, learnt to think, to ask questions, to sift and discern information. We have learnt to live in community with people who are like us and people who are different, people we like and people we find difficult. For those of you leaving, I hope and pray that you will be people of influence who work for good in our world, who use the articulacy you have to speak up for righteousness, justice, compassion and kindness. And I hope and pray that you feel able to draw on the goodness and love of God to sustain and help you. For in God we find wisdom and love, justice and mercy, hope and sustenance, peace and joy.

May God watch over all who are leaving, all who are returning next year, and may we all keep safe over the coming months.

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