

‘Isolation from other sheep can cause severe stress and should be avoided. Mirrors can be used in the absence of other sheep.’ I have that on the authority of a couple of vets in North Toronto.

Those of you locked down in isolation on your own might like to try that trick with mirrors. I doubt it will work, though. We humans, alas, usually recognise ourselves in the images we see in mirrors, or now on our computers. And such recognition is quite likely to add to any stress caused by isolation....

Anyway, that’s not the problem with today’s Johannine sheep. They, lucky things, are not isolated. I wondered whether sheep even in a flock might get a bit bored locked in just for the night but the majority internet view seemed to be that sheep were too thick to get bored. Witney farmers may think different!

Of course, these sheep are meant to be understood as lucky. They are in the best of hands, after all, they may have had some bad experiences of attempted sheep rustling but they are just fine now. They get all the food they need and being locked in with family and friends probably makes them feel good. Certainly it gives them the security they need against sheep thieves and the warmth they need against the night chill. They are probably pleased enough to come in after a full day’s munching clover – this pasture will have clover, of course - and after a restful sleep out they go the next morning for another good feed. This is fullness of life, sheep-style. There doesn’t now seem to be any threat to their contentment, they feel safe outdoors as well as in because they know their shepherd’s voice and trust him. They probably they get some ovine satisfaction by being addressed individually by their own names - as the text makes sure to tell us they are. Life couldn’t be better. I think this shepherd would know which ones like being scratched a little now and then. He almost certainly never says ‘mint sauce’ in his sheep’s hearing and even if he were to, I doubt they’d be able to explore the distressing implications of the concept.

All of this means that it’s difficult to make a tight analogy between the sheep in the enclosed space of the sheepfold and us in lockdown.

But I do want to suggest that lockdown can be a catalyst of abundant life at any rate for some of us. There is no belittling the suffering that lockdown can cause, the loneliness, the boredom, the distressing loss of normal contact with family and friends, the depression and indeed the violence in which it can be a factor. However, for some of us the adverse effects of lockdown are tolerable enough and some of us, possibly most of us, have felt some benefits. One of those is a reduction in the risk and fear of infection (there, actually is an analogy

with the security of the sheep in the sheepfold), but there are other benign effects, effects that we might call incidental rather than direct - if it weren't that it is a habit and purpose by no means incidental to our Easter God's nature to draw good out of disaster. So, many of us will have experienced a more than usual kindness from, family, friends and neighbours. I shall now have to be careful on the phone to my sister not to mention any shortfall in supplies for fear of receiving a food parcel. Yesterday's, not the first, was a response to my indicating that we a bit low on cheese – and behold, a large box of ecclesiastically-themed cheeses. It'll take a while to get through, I think I shall enjoy the Renegade Monk particularly - but I hope my appreciation of my sister's absurd generosity long outlasts the period of consumption.

So many acts of good-neighbourliness, generosity, love coming precisely out of the lockdown -besides the acts of heroic self-sacrifice made in the face of the crisis in general. These acts are to be noticed, cherished and celebrated. As a society we have rightly chosen to do some of that on Thursday evenings.

What is also to be noticed and what *is* being noticed with a greater attentiveness and appreciation than usual, I suspect, is God's creation. The sunny beauty of last month was a particular blessing much commented on. But every year we are set amid the beauty of the natural world and the wonder of its processes (come shine or rain). Every year I have the opportunity to delight in the slow and then sudden emergence of leaf and blossom on the apple trees in my garden and most years I don't take enough time to notice and enjoy and give thanks. This year it has been different and I am sure those of you who garden seriously will have relished what you have been seeing and enabling with a greater intensity this year. Perhaps we shall be less inclined in the future to take for granted the blessings God pours out on us in the natural and the social worlds.

Critically, lockdown offers us, or at least, some of us, the time to pay attention in general, - the opportunity to notice things, to appreciate, to reflect and ponder and pray, to feel, to feel for others, to rejoice, to lament, to give thanks. Not perhaps all of us, or not yet. There have had to be frenzies of activity to meet the direct and immediate threat of Covid19 to health but also in respect of the knock-on effects of the virus. I'm thinking for instance of those with jobs in education, for instance, where the old processes have had to be ripped up and new ones devised and put in place with all speed. I'm thinking of churches and all the *doing* in this Benefice these past weeks. All sorts of new provision made to protect the worship of the benefice, its life as community, the well-being of members of the congregations. What has been done is brilliant, full of creativity and a source of comfort and joy. The response of the congregations

has likewise been brilliant because without buy-in to the new and strange procedures, this Zoom community could not have been built as a place of both security and nourishment, both sheepfold and pasture.

That this Zoom Church wouldn't have happened without lockdown ought to be for us another indication of lockdown's positive transformative potential. But it's having being created in a burst of frantic, heroic activity directed *against* something we weren't going to allow to stop us doing the things we always did, against something we took to be essentially a *nuisance* might lead us to fail to *embrace* lockdown and so fail to take full advantage of its central gift of reflective time. We risk thinking that our situation now above all else demands more activity, the immediate development of new systems, a more extensive implementation of those systems, more problems solved, more ticks in more boxes for things *done*.

An article sent by the Sheldon community, which supports people in Christian ministry – and that's not just clergy - especially at times of stress and crisis, remarks on 'the different motivations for all of this 'doing'. And warns that among them is likely to be a 'subconscious attempt to avoid thought and feeling – a reluctance to bear the reality of what we face.'

If lockdown is a nuisance, I hope it can be seen as, literally, a blessed nuisance and that we can accept its gift of reflective time, even if honest thinking about and feeling the reality of what we face may not produce easy answers, wipe away problems or bring immediate consolation, for without an honest attentiveness to the way things really are, whatever our circumstances, we cannot have fullness of life.

Bishop Colin has recently written to clergy encouraging us under lockdown to try 'Retreat at Home' or 'Quiet Days at Home' but the key thing, he suggests, 'is not to let emails and zoom conferences squeeze out times for reflection and renewal'. Not just email and zoom, one might add, but actually any activity. And not just clergy activity either.

In the Benefice Bulletin Toby writes, 'I wonder if this time of lockdown might – for some of us – be an opportunity to slow down and reflect: a chance to discover the sacredness of slow.' As Toby knows, many of you will be laughing at that, from him. But look - metanoia, change of mind, repentance! Lockdown's transformative power indeed!

Some of you may be aware too that our archiepiscopal visitor is encouraging a slowing down and a turn to reflection. Sir Arthur has mandated an Inactive Wednesday for the Witney Clergy every week and he hopes the laity will sign up for that too.

If you want any higher authority than these to convince you of the merits of reflection and the grace available through lockdown, then let me point you a person whose Feast we celebrate this coming Friday – Julian of Norwich. She was one of the greatest spiritual writers of the Christian church and, not unconnectedly, she was seriously locked down. She chose to be *permanently* enclosed as an anchoress – no exit strategy - because she knew the power of prayerful reflection to draw her into a fuller understanding and deeper experience of the love of God. And could she do slow! The Long version of her Showings came 20 *years* of prayerful reflection after the Short version.

Because of rather than despite her confinement Julian was given life in abundance. Its foundation was the profoundest conviction and experience of the Love of God.

Julian shares the conviction, the experience of God's Love with those sheep we started with. They know their Shepherd and trust implicitly in his care for them: That is what grounds the fullness of life that they have.

Lockdown offers us space to deepen our understanding and experience of the love of God and move into the fullness of the identity that is ours by baptism, our identity as...sheep, rational, reflective, resurrection sheep - the trusting followers, whatever the difficulties of our lives of the one who calls us each lovingly by our names, the Good Shepherd who has laid down *his* life to draw from disaster - by the power of love - hope and joy and peace; to bring *us* new life in abundance.