



Reflections for My Student-Aged Self

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Isaiah 60: 1–7 2 Corinthians 4: 4–12

It is reassuring to discover on returning to Trinity 25 years after I graduated that not much has changed, even if it seems that every second-hand bookshop is now a coffee shop. The Fens in February are still pleasingly nippy, Henry VIII still brandishes a chair leg on Great Gate, the Trinity choir still sings a magnificent Magnificat, and Gardies still offers students a wholly unnecessary, yet somehow at 11pm essential, chip butty. I hope that when I head into Hall for dinner, our feast will still be observed from the rafters by a stuffed mallard.

Of course, at Trinity we maintain an illusion that nothing changes, even when it does. Is not the college motto, seen above High Table, the words ‘Semper eadem’, memorably translated by the late classics fellow Roger Dawe as ‘same old cheese’, mispronouncing the second word as Edam?

One of the great privileges of having stumbled into a career on the Paper of Record is that I could write the Times obituary for Roger, who died in 2020. A brilliant scholar, kind man and old-school eccentric, he was as happy with low culture as high; his supervisions would be peppered with lines from James Bond or the Carry On films as much as with Sophocles or Homer. He once pulled out a starter’s pistol during a lecture and ‘shot’ a student who had made a mistake. It was a fun obituary to write.

A few days later I received an email from Neil Hopkinson, Roger’s colleague and the Trinity director of studies who admitted me. “I saw Professor Diggle today,” he said, naming a Queen’s fellow in his dry Yorkshire way, “and he said that Roger would have enjoyed your obituary. I’m not sure that is the point of an obituary personally. But I enjoyed it too.”

That was the last time I heard from Neil, whose own obituary I would write eight months later when he died suddenly at just 63. I received the news during an Epiphany service by a text from my old supervision partner, Emma Woolerton, who had ended up working for Hansard, the parliamentary reporters, when I was writing the political sketch for *The Times*. By serendipity – a theme I will return to – our assigned seats in the press gallery of the Commons were next to each other and when we told Neil of this coincidence over tea in his rooms, he told me: “So you’re still cribbing off Emma’s homework then?”

The final article that Neil wrote was a review of Professor Diggle’s new Greek dictionary in a publication called *The Librarian*. In a beautiful final passage, he describes loaning new undergraduates a Greek and Latin dictionary, each some 2,000 pages thick, for the duration of their time at Trinity. It is more a ritual than a tradition, a semper eadem. “We climb a

narrow spiral staircase to the clock tower where the books are stored,” he wrote. “Sometimes as I hand them over there is a peal of bells.” Bless you Neil, and thank you.

Yet although *semper eadem* is what gives me comfort, my job is ever changing. One day I could be going to Normandy with D-Day veterans, the next watching the sun rise at Stonehenge with Druids, the day after reporting from Crufts or the Chelsea Flower Show. Perhaps the oddest day came on July 14th, 2019. It ended with me at Lord’s, writing 800 words in 45 minutes from the back of the pavilion as fireworks exploded after England won a thrilling cricket World Cup, but had begun 12 hours earlier in prison. I had been invited into Pentonville to see the chaplain, Fr Jonathan Aitken, take his first mass since being ordained.

What a journey he had been on. An award-winning journalist in the 1960s, then a Tory politician and member of the cabinet, he had the most humiliating of falls in 1999 when he was sentenced to 18 months in prison for perjury. Twenty years later, this Old Etonian, Old Belmarshian, had become an Anglican priest and was finally doing good in the world by ministering to those in prison. The previous night I had been to a celebration of his ordination at St Matthew’s Westminster, where there was a moment of amusement caused by a late arrival, who had presumably used an electronic device to find the church, for the silence of the prayers was broken by a loud voice proclaiming the words, ‘You have reached your destination.’ How wondrously apt that pronouncement felt given the route the new priest’s life had taken. God works in mysterious ways and speaks, it turns out, with the rather tinny voice of an American woman.

As a journalist, I never know where my satnav, professional or spiritual, will take me. A couple of months before that service, I was in bed tackling *The Times* crossword at 11pm when my phone rang with an order from the office. “Go to Paris in the morning,” it said. “The editor wants you to write about Notre Dame.” A few hours earlier, like many of you, I had watched in horror the footage of that beautiful cathedral being consumed by flames and the collapse of its steeple. Now, they wanted me to go and smell the charred air.

Eurostar was on strike, naturally, and the airline timetables were unhelpful so grabbing a few hours’ sleep, my passport, and a coffee I leapt in the car and drove to Paris and back in a day, a 600-mile round trip. I found a city in mourning. Between the stalls selling second-hand books and pieces of tat to tourists on the Quai de Montebello, I found that one Pascal Plottier had pinned to a tree his scribbled tribute to the grand old lady. ‘Ce matin, la pluie est salée,’ it read. This morning, the rain is salty. ‘These are the tears,’ Monsieur Plottier went on, ‘of all the friends of Notre Dame.’ As the church burnt the night before, hundreds had kept a vigil. They formed a congregation in the streets more vast than any church could hold, fearing the worst, praying for a miracle.

The next morning the feeling was more one of relief that the damage had not been worse and confidence that Our Lady would rise again. ‘Spira, spera’, words engraved on a pair of bellows in Victor Hugo’s *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, seemed relevant. Where there is breath, there is hope.

I walked a few minutes through the Latin Quarter to the parish church of St Séverin, a near contemporary of Notre Dame that had experienced its own resurrection: seriously damaged by fire in 1448, it was rebuilt grander than before. I paused beside a marble sculpture of Our Lady and Child, where dozens of candles had been lit that day, casting their flickering influence upon the Virgin, a reminder that for all its destructive power, fire can be beautiful, too. Suddenly a passage from John’s Gospel came to mind, as it had earlier on seeing a photograph of the gleaming cross above the altar of the carbonised

Notre Dame. That old message of hope, echoed in the readings from Isaiah and Corinthians that we heard tonight: 'The light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not.'

We have all known dark times over the past couple of years with Covid, the cost of living crisis, climate change and the threat of war on our continent. Our social discourse, especially online, is often rancorous with people being too quick to take offence or too careless about causing it. There have been moments when it has felt that our society's satnav had gone badly astray. Would we ever get back on the right road? At times it has felt that all we can do is follow what my *Times* colleague Danny Finkelstein once called in politics the 'Travolta-Micawber principle': that is, staying alive and hoping something will turn up.

I mentioned serendipity earlier, that wonderful moment when something positive turns up when you least expect it. The word was coined in English in 1754 by Horace Walpole in a letter to his friend Horace Mann in which he referred to a Persian fairy tale, *The Three Princes of Serendip*, who were always making accidental, joyous discoveries of things they weren't looking for.

Early in the pandemic I visited our second-hand bookshop in Blackheath, southeast London, where I am churchwarden, and in a moment of serendipity found myself drawn to this copy of *The Book of Common Prayer*. And what particularly intrigued me was the inscription written in the front to its first owner. 'Tilty Church. To Mary Bush from the Vicar. Christmas 1916.' You don't need me to remind you of the grimness of that date, a month after the end of the Somme. War memorials the length of the country record the names of families whose Christmas will have felt very dark. There are 16 names on the First World War memorial for Tilty, a small Essex village 30 miles south of here, and the community will have been scarred by the loss of each one.

I have discovered nothing about Mary Bush, but the vicar was an interesting character. Edward Maxted was a former tinsmith, who saved up to put himself through theology college. Awarded the parish of Tilty by its patron, the Countess of Warwick, a free-spirited socialite and socialist who liked to encourage turbulent priests, Maxted became known as the Red Vicar for the views he expounded from a soap box, usually about farm workers' rights, every Saturday evening in the strongly Tory nearby market town of Great Dunmow, in the face of much barracking. Such were the feelings he aroused that on Guy Fawkes' Night in 1909 the town burned him in effigy. After the war, he emigrated to New Zealand and then the US where he preached and died in Houston in his 90s. His spiritual satnav had certainly taken him on a journey. Yet here he is in the midst of darkness, a war he opposed, passing on this light at Christmastime to Mary Bush. I hope it brought her comfort.

And this is doubly poignant because Tilty Church had known dark Christmases before. Seven hundred and one years earlier, shortly after the end of a six-year lockdown of English churches by Pope Innocent III, the last person to order the closure of our doors until Archbishop Welby, the church at what was then Tilty Abbey was ransacked by King John's soldiers during mass on Christmas Day. Chests were emptied, the valuables were all seized, several monks were killed.

Yet within five years a new nave was built, with beautiful thin lancet windows you can still see today. The church was renewed. Further enlargements led to it being compared for grandeur to Tintern Abbey in Monmouthshire, but the Black Death in 1348 and the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536 rocked it again. And again it was restored, with some particularly fine Georgian additions. It still lives and breathes and serves the community today, albeit as part of a five-church benefice. The light keeps burning. It always does.

I mentioned that the word serendipity first appears in a letter from one Horace to another. The example of Tilty Church and Notre Dame and of what is happening in all our lives post-Covid reminds me of a line from another Horace, the Roman poet (I did learn something here): 'Merses profundo pulchrior evenit'. Plunge it into the depths and it will emerge even more beautiful.

This is the Christian message and the duty that falls on us all: to soothe and to reassure, to console and to succour, to survive and rebuild something more beautiful than before. As our spiritual satnav leads us along the windings of this mortal life, sometimes finding dead ends, diversions and unexpected bypasses, all we can do is pray we reach our blessed destination by facing our moments of darkness with a faithful heart, guided by the light that comes from above and the confidence that we are all loved by God. Because that is the only *semper eadem* we ever need.