

EMBRACING SOLITUDE

I have lived alone in my retirement village since my wife died in November 2016. It has been far from easy, and yet I have been learning the difference between loneliness and solitude. Loneliness has to be resisted in sensible and creative ways, though its ominous reality will never be far away. Solitude can be embraced as a life style with new possibilities.

The social, let alone economic, constraints upon us in this time of national and global affliction caused by the Coronavirus, are devastating in their own way. The times are out of joint. All communal gatherings, so distinctive to the human race, are necessarily banned from taking place. There is no current sport to attend or to watch on the television. Blank spaces are everywhere. I am advised not even to go to my usual coffee shop with a good book or this very newspaper for company. Even shopping should be avoided or, if it is necessary for essential food items, let it be done as swiftly as possible (or better still, on line). Such are the hazards and the awkwardness in an entirely unusual experience for us all. 'Social distancing' is the watchword now, and how unfriendly it seems.

What about the poor and the unemployed? Are the taxis safe environments for those obliged to use them? Where is the necessary one metre gap between travelers on the taxis or buses? I have asked my fortnightly domestic helper to stay at home – on full pay; it is the safer way and the kindest, whether one can iron clothes or not!

A new paradox comes into play: solidarity is to be found in a shared isolation.

There is also another, linked paradox at work. Though we are driven by circumstances into an unnatural physical absence from one another, our vision has enlarged at the mental and emotional level. That can only be a good thing. The people of Wuhan have become our friends, and we rejoice now to know that they can see the blue sky there again and that the birds are singing. How many of us have had to google the whereabouts of Wuhan or look it up in a printed atlas? Ah, so there it is tucked away in China, this formerly unheard of city which has a population of 11 million people. Whether we realise it or not, we have almost overnight become global people, a worldwide family of many faiths or none, of many different cultures and languages, in mutual suffering and concern. This can only be a good thing: solidarity in a shared physical isolation.

In the church to which I belong we have for many years used a Prayer for Africa. It was composed in the 1970s by the well-known religious figure Trevor Huddleston, who had become a bishop in Tanzania. It has served us well, being set to music and being translated into various African languages. A few verbal changes have been made along the way to accommodate changes on the continent.. Now, I think, the prayer must be changed more radically. "God, bless

Africa”, broad though it is, is no longer sufficient. It must become “God, bless our world” and nothing less.

In our self-imposed solitudes for our mutual benefit, we can at the same time embrace all our fellow human beings in a newly activated compassion, whether in prayer or action or, better still, in both.

Bishop Michael Nuttall