

REMEMBRANCE DAY 2020

*And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.*

For some reason, when I began to think about this year's Remembrance Day, those two lines from Christina Rossetti's poem kept sounding in my head.

*And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.*

There seems so much and so many to remember this year, and so much one would want to forget. So much to regret, so much to honour and grieve. Such a volume of remembrance; such a scale of grief; such a deep well of what one would, if one could, forget.

This is the year Brexit was largely eclipsed from the headlines; the year that saw growing and continuing social and political unrest in the USA; natural disasters of bushfires and floods and typhoons on a huge scale in Australia, the USA, and the Philippines; accidents on unprecedented scale such as the destruction of the port areas of Beirut; the barbaric attacks on innocent people in France and Vienna; a major earthquake in Turkey; the year the Irish churches closed; the year so many were separated at rites of passage from their loved ones; when rites of passage gathered strictly reduced numbers; the year the very act of singing was at once anathema and healing; the year that gathering for a meal became fraught; the year aged care facilities became both prisons and havens; the year health care workers were unashamedly acknowledged for the heroes they already are; the year a new vocabulary of normative and preventative behaviours engaged us: social distancing, sanitising, cocooning, lockdown, self-isolating: the year that Covid-19 loomed and kept looming, and is looming still with large parts of the world infected as this is written.

Close to home, it was the year that for perhaps the first time since 1827, the house at 64A Lower Baggot St was empty for a time, just the spirits to keep it company and guard it; such a sacred space of memory and deed, starkly devoid of living flesh and voice: the house that Catherine built, and the garden where her body lies alongside those other early companions. The house where she died on November 11th, 1841, as the evening draw in on Baggot St.

It seems, this year, 2020, as if the whole world has become a statistic of staggering proportions; each day exponentially either growing or diminishing Covid-19 numbers.

It seems as if the whole world has experienced a hiatus, an existential pause enforced by an extraneous agent. We have experienced a cessation of activity in the arenas of business and art and theatre, manufacturing, sport and education. The hospitality and tourism sectors have been dealt a grievous blow.

The ambivalence of that pause will take time to reveal its meaning- the ongoing possibility of people working from home, the assumed primacy of the modern mega-City seriously called into question, the positive alternatives to in-church, clerical-based worship, the ongoing reduction perhaps of international "commuter" and tourist travel. We have been led to a reclamation of the notion of home; a reassessment of our assumptions about global reach; in many ways a coming back to the basics in a salutary sense. We have been led to a reassessment of how we treat the elderly and most vulnerable in our societies:

Black Lives Matter; Old Lives Matter; Disabled Lives Matter. Around the world there has been a perceptible diminution of pollution. The air has belonged largely to the birds. The Earth has breathed.

All of this is inviting our reflection and response as opportunity rather than necessarily outright disaster. The genuine disasters, of course, are the casualties to the virus- those who've died or lost loved ones, or are suffering serious long-term symptoms.

It is not yet clear whether the cessations and disruptions are temporary or long-lasting.

Indeed, it is not clear yet whether the virus will lose interest and dissipate, or be vanquished by the amazing, longed for science of vaccination. Or whether it will shape our lives for decades.

For many of us Covid-19 has so far been an inconvenience to endure; but for millions, and still ongoing, it is a reality that will result in loss and death and perhaps long-term incapacity, given the chameleon nature of this virus. At the heart of it, humanity has been humbled; brought low by an invisible, virulent foe.

There is darkness. There is death.

Says Jesus, *I have known it.*

There is blockage and stoppage and collapse.

The taken for granted has been thrown out the window;

The ordinary and pedestrian have been compromised.

Says Jesus, *I understand.*

The predictable has fled,

the normal has dissolved.

Says Jesus, *I know. It happened to me too.*

There is fear and confusion and flux.

Says Jesus, *I have been there.*

I am with you, I have been there

I am with you, I suffer it.

Do not be afraid.

Lament the losses, comfort my people,

Honour the life, cherish the loved ones.

Hope and heal, hold to life,

I am with you.

Says Jesus:

I am the still point in a spinning world

I am the life.

Says Jesus,

There will be light, there is light,

there will be healing, there is healing,

hope and hope and hope there is,

there will be music; there is music.

There will be life; there is life.

Easter is a love story. Easter tells the whole story.

There will be Easter.

After Calvary I walked the road to Emmaus.

We will walk it together.

Advent draws on to unexplored paths and beginnings.

Christmas is a love story; Christmas tells the whole story.

There will be Christmas,

perhaps the purest and closest to

the first Christmas for a long time,

a story of people displaced but hopeful;

of families disrupted but loving,

of signs and portents for change and new wonder.

I am with you.

With you all.

There has been death.

There will be birth.

One of the most poignant stories I have read during this year was [a recent account](#) in *The Irish Times* of the story of a harp. I don't quite know why it touched me so deeply, but intuitively I feel it is an important story for these times, an important story for us to remember and take heart from.

A ten-year old girl from Dublin called Muireann Ni Mhuirthile, has shown a gift for playing the harp. Her family had previously hired an instrument for her to learn on; but as her talent emerged, they made the investment in a costly but beautiful hand-made harp. The harp-maker, Kevin Harrington, works in Roundwood, County Wicklow, the county immediately south of Dublin. During the strict lockdown it was not possible for the family to travel pick up the harp nor the craftsman to deliver it. Eventually, they all devised a plan to meet at one of the designated county border areas, each on their respective side of the border, and enact a formal handover of the new harp, so splendidly created of the best resonant cherrywood.

So, high up in the Wicklow mountains, south of Dublin, at one of the official border points which in reality was a potholed water and grass decorated, poorly sealed track of a road, they made the exchange while keeping appropriate social distancing. It was a solemn and sacred moment replete with meaning, because of course the harp is, with the trifoliate shamrock, the national symbol of Ireland itself that resonates through its history and folklore- *the Harp That Once Through Tara's Halls*, the poignant *Minstrel Boy*, the myth of the magic harp of the High King Dagda. In the story of Dagda, the harp plays three types of salvific music: lament, glad song and soothing lullaby. Each of those types of music has its place and purpose, even in a pandemic. How are we expressing sorrow, how are we affirming joy, how are we sounding the music of peaceful healing?

In the midst of the solemnity the little girl, the talented harpist, leapt up and down for joy to see and hear the gift she was being given. Such an effort in the making and the handing over of the harp. Such a bright and wondrous gift. And then she and the harp maker moved away from the family group and she played the harp for him in the windswept, wild heathland of the Wicklow mountains.

And so, we ask ourselves in this strangest of years:

What are the old roads that will enable the new music?
 Where are the border crossings for creativity?
 Who is crafting the new harps?
 What is the new music?
 Who is able to render the music in meaningful sound?

For what and whom and where do we play lament?
 For what and whom and where do we play glad song?
 For what and whom and where do we play lullaby?

What do we remember; what do we forget?
 What must we remember?
 What can we not afford to forget?
 Where is the blessing; where is the hope?
 Where is the new music?

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