A Pastoral Epistle from the Dean of Christ Church 3 April 2020

To Members: Past and Present

Dear Friends and Colleagues

It is good to be writing once again to alumni, and I hope and trust that this letter finds you well, and managing to stay healthy and safe. I am writing this from the Deanery, and you are all very much in our thoughts at this present time. I am most conscious that though we are distant, we are not apart.

Almost everyone that receives this letter will be in to their third week of lockdown: social distancing and self-isolation. I sincerely hope that you are not feeling too much melancholy, though some anxiety or nostalgia (for more than one daily walk, or just some idle consumerism browsing in the shops) seems to be pretty routine.

At a time when we have to concentrate hard on the present – each day – but also begin to imagine and plan for the future, I hope you will not mind if I say a word or two about the past. Most especially, our nostalgia for it. Whether you are an undergraduate or graduate student in the present, and fondly remembering the last bop or boat race, tea or tutorial. Or, your year in your peers, some decades ago. (Note: if you were up in the 1970s, you’d feel at home in the House now – flares are back, and things we never thought would ever fashionable again are being worn once more).

But what of nostalgia? The word denotes a sentimentality for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations. The term nostalgia is derived from a Greek compound of two words: nóstos, meaning "homecoming" and álgos, meaning "pain" or "ache".

Our modern use was first coined by a 17th-century medical student to describe the anxieties displayed by Swiss mercenaries fighting away from home. So it was a kind of diagnosable medical condition - a form of melancholy. You treated nostalgia by sending people home, back to the places and people that provided comfort, reassurance and roots. In more recent times, nostalgia has been associated with our yearning for the past – the "good old days". Correspondingly, the term has moved from being a treatable medical condition to something rather more positive.

Nostalgia can be a good thing, but it helps us to recall and cherish – both – what we valued from the past. It is what the present hopes to retrieve from the past, and preserve for the future. Sometimes these are artefacts or customs. More usually, however, they are values and beliefs. Institutions that cherish the past - churches, museums, colleges to name but a few - need friends who persevere, even in tough and challenging times. We need to stick with our values and beliefs through thick and thin.

That is why, I think the loyalty that we have to the House and we hold in ourselves is almost ontological. It does not depend on success or failure. I have personal experience of this as a lifelong fan of Everton football club. The trophy cabinet has been bare for a long time. But I remain committed, despite the ongoing barren league and cup campaigns. I dare to live in hope. The House, however, cultivates and evokes a much deeper commitment for me, as it is does for you. It is not about fans; but rather, members for life, and friends.
William Hazlitt once said that “the seat of knowledge is in the head; of wisdom – the heart. We are sure to judge wrong, if we do not feel right”. Today, we are surrounded by facts, knowledge, truths, half-truths and untruths. News, fake news, and bad news. And sometimes good news. But knowledge is seldom enough; we need wisdom. And if this institution of ours is anything, it is a home for wisdom. Wisdom for our society, and to help face all the challenges that lie ahead of us as a House – and in our nation.

The House is not a private members’ club, here to serve its own needs. We are a support-based institution, here to serve the wider world. We live in challenging times. Yet even at times like this, perhaps as you look back, please also look forward. This is a House that evokes the right kind of nostalgia. Let us work together, to make it a place to which future generations will yearn to return to; and yearn to continue to shape and build up, just as we do now.

Wherever this letter finds you today, I ask you to walk and work with us in our next steps. I – we – need you as companions, friends, supporters and benefactors; as people of goodwill to support the House. You are Christ Church. I am Christ Church. Everyone who had, has or will have the opportunity to work or study here is Christ Church too. This is the House to which we are committed, we believe in, and to which we belong.

In closing, let me share a poem with you by John O’Donohue which helped to lift his spirits when he was melancholic and feeling isolated. It strikes me as the right kind of hopeful nostalgia – not for what once was, but for what might be, if we dare to live in hope:

This is the time to be slow,
Lie low to the wall
Until the bitter weather passes.

Try, as best you can, not to let
The wire brush of doubt
Scrape from your heart
All sense of yourself
And your hesitant light.

If you remain generous,
Time will come good;
And you will find your feet
Again on fresh pastures of promise,
Where the air will be kind
And blushed with beginning.

As I said in my previous letter, please keep in touch with us, and let us know if we can be of help at all at the present time. Please keep in touch with each other, and look out for your neighbours, peers and colleagues. Above all else, please remember that you are member of a large, living body – and cherished part of that. Stay safe, stay healthy, stay connected. This comes with my warmest good wishes to you all.

As ever, Martyn