



Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic

Some of us are more fortunate than others in the need to make journeys that seek to uncover more of who we are. Many years ago I faced a challenge to my identity which demanded that I made that journey. Had I not done so I would have faced serious collapse. I wrote poetry to help me during it.

One effect of the current corona virus pandemic and the consequent lockdown, is that of depriving everyone of social interaction. The loss of communication, income, and lack of interaction with family, friends and others, throws us into a world of worry, anxiety uncertainty, social and economic deprivation, loneliness, and isolation, where the possibility of our own deaths seems closer than we might otherwise expect. A major concern is the harm that this will do to our abilities to interact with others after the lockdown ends. Medical practitioners and researchers are already predicting that there will be major long term effects on mental health which will last for years to come.

One of the misconceptions we possess is that our sense of self-identity is something that is very personal and is exclusive to each of us. In practice it is what we take on board through our interaction with others. From my own work I suggest that this might include the manner of how we interact with others, but self-identity is created collectively, and this personal element plays a relatively small part. Thus the reliance on others for the creation of a sense of self-identity can have disastrous consequence for our self-esteem, most notably at times of duress, such as during this lockdown, and when it is being otherwise attacked.

These are issues I have had to face. These poems are simply my own thoughts and reflections. Like a Pilgrim's Progress I offer them in the hope that others might find value in them in their own journeys. Although I employ texts from religious scriptures, I treat them in a secular way. My aim is to compare what these religious traditions say against what psychology expects. In some sections I refer to the Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas from Christian antiquity. However, it is important to note that this Gospel is not being used here as sacred scripture and its provenance is not being discussed. It is treated here entirely as a secular and independent text.

This document can be accessed at: www.com.tgdr.co.uk/documents/001C-PandemicThoughts.pdf



Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic Number 1. The Music Trees

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these *"Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic"*. I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek.

Every death is a heartache for some family, and the pain and grief of that parting must be fully expressed. However, the end is another beginning in the cycle of life.

In my poem "The Music Trees" written a long time before the present pandemic, I have tried to express something of that cycle, the unpredictability of death, the ripples we create throughout our everyday lives, and how we live on though the memories transmitted to the music and song of the trees, after life has passed.

THE MUSIC TREES

She watching sits as ringlets spread
From central stillness left behind
While shafted in their golden glow
Portrayed in stillness on the ground
Light's casted haloes dance their way
Through canopies of branches held
In autumn colours leaves entwined.

For in this warm September eve
No one could tell the blighted fly
Its fitful course across the lake
Would end within the fishes' bite
And soulful in the turmoil's wake
The passing sound of water breaks
The rustle from the trees on high.

Enflamed by sun on forest ground
The ripples reach the nearby shore
Where mirrored by the water's edge
They set in dance the move of trees
With bended light against the sky
To list in time to nature's course
Until dispersed to dance no more.

In tinselled tone the autumn trees
Prepare the way for spring's rebirth
As sapless leaves their work complete
Caressed by wind and nature's force
In endless motion search for flight
From nurtured branches made replete
And through decay renew the earth.

In harmony with nature's realm
The music trees sing of her tryst
To seek not grief when life is gone
But crown the life of offspring run
Where leaf and fly and human form
Give way in death for life's rebirth
The trees sing of our greatest gift.

November 1995

REFLECTION

For all who hold a religious belief death is never the end. In 1st Corinthians Chapter 15 Paul discusses the Resurrection of Jesus and how everybody will be transformed in a heavenly life. He finishes with his paean of victory over death: *"Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.* For other traditions, death is part of the re-cycling of life until a state of unity or Nirvana is reached. For those who do not have such beliefs there will still never be an end: indeed there cannot be an end because we will never be around to know that our time has ceased: our lives still live on in the memories of those who were around us, and in the music of the trees when the time of life has passed.

Our own deaths are times of parting, but permission to grieve by those left behind must never be suppressed or denied. The loss of the love, care, support, wellbeing, and compassion are devastations which leave people bereft. It is those people who were at one time around us, who suffer the great loss. During the present pandemic it is likely that each of us will know of at least one person who has died, alone, without loved ones and family around them, and in a clinical hospital ward. Also, family and loved ones who cannot go to the funerals of people who have died.

According to our own beliefs we ask or pray that people can be given time to find their own ways through these crises. We ask or pray for all people who are in this position and that they can find ways to express and work through their griefs. If we do not allow ourselves to accept the hurt and the trauma their grief creates, we cannot transform the sorrows of death into the gratitude for all that has been given in the past. And find that, in the sun that beams down on us, and in the joys of nature, and for us in our own lives, and in the music of the trees, we can uncover their greatest gift.



Thoughts Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic.

2. Is there Anyone There?

Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic. Number 2: Is There Anyone There?

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these *"Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic"*. I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek.

In the first of these reflections, using the poem on the *"Music Trees"*, I considered the cycle of life and death. Every death is a heartache for some family, and the pain and grief of that parting must be fully expressed. However, the end is another beginning in the cycle of life.

In this second poem I consider another challenge that the pandemic can bring..... and that concerns the images for others that each of us tries to create. This poem is about a housewife trapped into domesticity by her children. Because of the current experiences of lock down, with children being kept at home with their parents, unable to go out and see and play with their friends, these feelings of entrapment must potentially be very much greater. Although my poem was again written long before the present pandemic, it expresses some of the stresses which I believe people must now be feeling. This poem is not about trying to keep an impossibly tidy house..... it is about being trapped by the need to present an image which is impossible to sustain.

IS THERE ANYONE THERE?

"Is there anyone there?" Called the vicar
As he knocked on the red painted door
As the toys in their chaos lay in silence
On a prided but untidy floor
But never his knock was answered
And never a voice was heard
As the children were bade to keep silence
As the rest of the house was prepared.

"I am coming just now", called the housewife
With the countdown to entry begun
As she checks to affirm that her welcome
Sets standards her lifestyle has run
For the image she always must offer
Is the best her behaviour can do
In her drive to support an impression
Of control that she seeks to pursue.

But each time her convictions are threatened
The door is then bolted and locked
By acts that themselves bear the witness
To the feelings that intellect blocked
For the depths of her mind holds a prison
Of feelings she cannot explore
Which the selfhood of care and profession
At one time gave power to ignore.

Then the knocking her mind never answers
Destroys the control she's applied
For the torment of children's insistence
Breaks open the feelings inside
And the care and commitment to others
That shines from the depth of her heart
Is tinged with the need for assurance
And worries that fear will impart.

"Who really was there?" Thought the vicar
As he turned from the red painted door
While the housewife took off in the silence
The mask which unworthiness wore
To transfer the concern she is offered
To the image her willpower's prepared
As the toys keep their counsel in silence
On the anguish that nobody's heard.

After "The Traveller" by Walter De-la-Mare

September 1998

REFLECTION

Sometimes what might appear to be the most obvious things may seem trite, and do not help. In the Bible in Luke Chapter 12 verse 22 onwards Jesus said to his disciples, *“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you”.*

In this passage, Jesus is rightly describing how we are all valued in this Kingdom of God. but in the rest of the chapter he is describing the challenges that must be faced for those who seek this kingdom it and the commitment it requires. Simply reciting these verses to someone who feels trapped by the situation they are in and can see no way of escape, whether they be the housewife, carers for the elderly, handicapped or infirm, or those in lockdown, does not help. The vicar in his visit was unable to help.

Help can never be enforced, instead it must always be made available in love and care for people to accept it when they are ready. Above all we must accept that this need to reject is very real for the person concerned, we must honour and respect these needs, and never force our views and opinions on anyone. When we do offer help to anyone, we may find it is rejected. That does not mean we should stop offering help, companionship, and support, even if such rejection has taken place. Instead it means listening to people, finding out what their real needs are, offering what is correct for them at the time, and acting with love, care, and respect.

We must find ways forward, not by acting from outside as helpers or supporters, but as companions on our common journeys, so that we all can together discover the love which is described in the Bible, and find ways to uncover the self-worth and self-acceptance which is promised by Jesus in Luke Chapter 12. That is not just in the life of the housewife, but in all of our lives.

We ask or pray according to our own beliefs for all people who feel trapped or imprisoned in mind, body, and spirit. We remember those people whose sense of worthiness and self-worth has been destroyed or diminished by the situation they are in, including abusive coercion and by the actions of others. We ask or pray for all people who feel such emptiness inside. At this time, we particularly remember and pray for all people trapped in homes or in other situations where the threats or the realities of physical abuse and emotional abuse are very real. We ask or pray for all people trapped in households where, particularly at this time of lock down, escape may seem ever more like an impossibility. We ask or pray that they may be granted the courage, strength, calmness, and stamina to find their true self-worth which is described by Jesus in the Gospel message, and to discover new hope in the light of life.

ps. Did the vicar manage to get through the door?



Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic. Number 3: Elastoplast Eyes

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these *“Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic”*. I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek.

This poem, *“Elastoplast Eyes”* is about a homeless woman who used to frequent the pews of a London church, St Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square. Sitting quietly in a corner she would often go unnoticed and by taping her glasses with Elastoplast to form narrow slits to see through, she was trying to hide from the world. Like the previous poem *“Is There Anyone There?”*, this is a poem about hiding the inner self. The poem also tells of what we do to her through our own actions, and how our own refusals to see, can have such a destructive effect.

ELASTOPLAST EYES

So what are the pressures that lead her to bind?
Her life to a world which two cuts have defined
By glasses so taped that its scope is surveyed
From the slits in elastoplast eyes.

Is she someone to pity or someone to fear?
What past and what future is hers to declare?
Her vengeance sought by an anger made clear
In the hurt of elastoplast eyes.

Then who is the child, which is hidden inside?
With the hopes and ideals the world has defiled
She says she’s a duchess; we laugh at the thought
When we look at elastoplast eyes.

And what is the cause of the bitterness brought?
Is it hardship or misuse that mankind has wrought?
Which captures her world with a fortune defined
In the mask of elastoplast eyes.

Or could this be someone who's tried to believe?
In a goodness too great for the mind to conceive
Brought low by the values she never could keep
To her world of elastoplast eyes.

Do we notice her fear as we try to walk by?
When we try not to see her or hear anger's cry
As we quicken our step and look towards the sky
To escape from elastoplast eyes.

Then what of the hurt our rejection creates?
Or the way she will hide from the pain it instates?
By concealing herself from the world and her fate
With the veil of elastoplast eyes.

So, however disturbed in thought or in mind
Should we treat her like trash in the gutter we find
We'll smash all her hopes by the actions we take
When our brains have elastoplast eyes.

24 Sept 2002

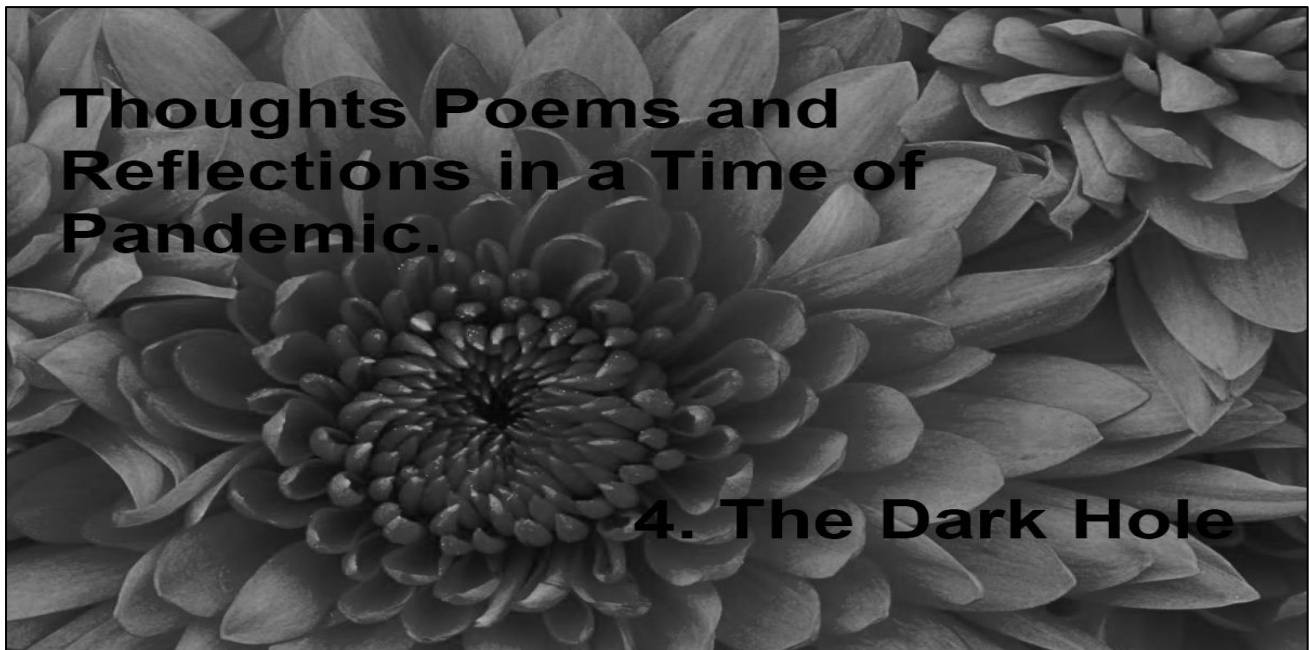
REFLECTION

As far as I am aware, this woman was the matron for a hospital which was bombed in wartime and who was so traumatised that she could no longer sleep inside. Whatever the cause, she like all of us, can have many burdens to bear. In the teaching of the Buddha it is said that: "*Life is a person's dearest possession, but when that person is confronted with insuperable difficulties and unbearable burdens, very life becomes an intolerable burden*".

The Buddha also said: "*Radiate boundless love towards the entire world*" and "*Love is a gift of one's inner most soul to another so both can be whole.*" Healing is not just about providing food and lodgings for the homeless, it is about covering and surrounding all such people with love.

In my view a religion which enfolds all people in the Gospel of love can create the greatest good in the world. However, a religion which excludes anyone or any group from full inclusion and the message of universal love does the opposite, and can create the greatest evil instead. Sadly, there are too many religious groups and people who use their own doctrines to reinforce tribal identities which act to exclude others of different races, ethnicities, social groups, and sexual and gender identities, throughout the world today.

We ask or pray according to our own beliefs for all the homeless and dispossessed, stateless people, asylum seekers, and refugees, those who go hungry and those without any support, people suffering from mental trauma, people made invisible are regarded as non-entities by ourselves, countries and states. Open our eyes to the hurt and rejection our thoughts and actions may create. Remember all people in refugee camps and resettlement places all over the world. In London, and all over the United Kingdom, remember the homeless who in this time of lockdown are now desperate for water to drink as well as food.



Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic. Number 4: The Dark Hole

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these *"Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic"*. I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek.

For the woman in the previous poem "Elastoplast Eyes" the future must have seemed bleak but what can be most devastating of all is the loss of hope. Probably most of us will have encountered periods at some time where life can seem totally bleak. That has happened to me and this poem *"The Dark Hole"* describes my experiences at a time when that occurred.

THE DARK HOLE

A dark hole opens before me
Unprepared, unexpected, I flounder near the rim
And try to swim against the current's flow
But it drags me in
Fearful, frantic, I thrash about and watch the life I've made
Dragged into the vortex down below
With one last gasp I grab a rope
And with all my willpower hold on and just manage not to let go.

But this is no storm of death
For I hear the song of the self in the Siren's call
With a demand for life of a different kind
In the wreck of all I know
Unremitting, unstoppable, the Siren call orders me to take
One single cataclysmic act to destroy the life
Which willpower still controls
And devastate all things and the lives of friends and those I love.

What now does the future hold?
The Siren's call is now out of range but still lies behind
Some future tempest arising from the strength.
Of the conflict's power
Driving, forcing, a future crisis triggered from some event
Magnified by the vulnerability of my mind
To destroy willpower's role
When the next time comes; I will not find any escape from the hole.

I must look for another route
Before willpower again fails; I must chart a different course
And give release to the identity I fight
In some more ordered way
Trying, hoping, to find any new method of retaining control
When I have tried this approach before
And not found any limit
To the distance it would travel along its charted journey.

What hope does the future give?
Do I continue to resist and face a future catastrophe?
Or am I compelled to follow identity's course?
To end willpower's role.
Desperately, longingly, I search for a way out and can find none
For both drive me to the same unsought for shore
Destroying all that I value most
In despair I cry out for help and do not know which way to turn.

As at November 1987

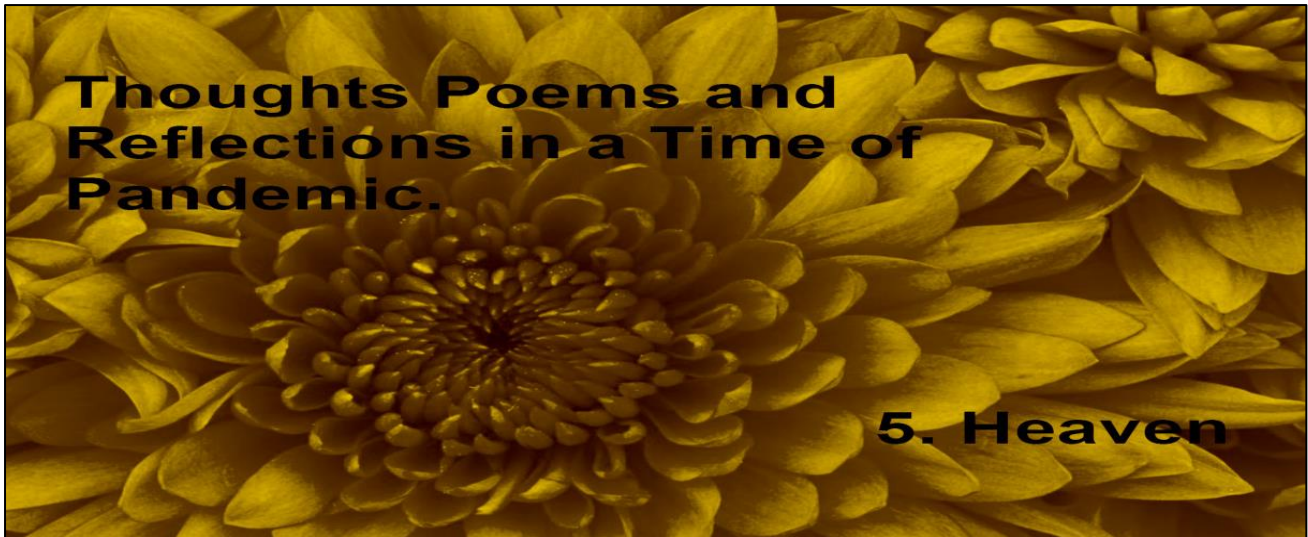
REFLECTION

What the cause of this crisis was need not concern us here. It is sufficient to say I was attempting to live a life which identified me with the expectations of others, not those of my own. It is also about identity, not behaviour. In my poem on "Anger" (No.7), I describe more of its effects. When these things happen; we can feel totally isolated and alone - but we should never be isolated from love.

In Romans 8 verses 35 to 39 Paul says: "Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep)." No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow - not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below - indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord"

At times of crisis our own feelings of anger, fear and guilt, with the very real fear of being rejected, together with the frequent feeling that we are the only person suffering, and that no one else could possibly understand, can blind us to that love. Yet regardless of religious belief that love is always present: if only we can become able to open our eyes to see and comprehend.

In a time of bleakness, depression, and loss of hope, when life seems unbearable, according to our own beliefs, open our eyes to the love that exists around us. Let us know that we can never be separated from that love and help us to find in the company of others the support that we need.



Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic. Number 5: Heaven

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these *"Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic"*. I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek.

The three previous poems are ones which describe trauma and despair, yet most religious beliefs promise salvation and an after-life, in which images of heaven are described. This may vary from the Christian perceptions of a place of Glory in the presence of God to the enlightenment or Nirvana in the Buddhist tradition where the self is absorbed into enlightenment, so there is no personification of God. Or in Hinduism, where multitudes of Gods represent a deeper presence in all religions: which is of a God and Heaven greater than any physical representation that cannot be otherwise expressed.

HEAVEN

Is heaven a place when observed from afar
The Palace of God in His Might and His Power
A place where the righteous sing out His Praise
To God in His Glory, and where no humour strays?
You show me a place where my feet must feel sore
From standing and singing God's praise evermore
Then sometimes I'd tire of the bright golden light
And instead wish to see the stars of the night.

But these views of heaven are not ones of mine
For my thoughts see heaven a place outside time
Where eternity soars free in its own place apart
To observe the time passing like lines on a chart
Extracting from life all the times which we've set
When all the best moments of life have been met
And revealing in these the whole Godhead of joy
With each moment the fountain of love I enjoy.

Eternity is not now, in the future or past
For eternity is where every moment shall last
And the heaven I sense is piled high to the brim
With the passion of love and of care and concern
Overflowing with people whose delight I perceive
Through love which I give and the love I receive
And joining those people whose rapture I share
Are all those I love who will always be there.

Heaven is not here, in the earth or the sky
And you will never find heaven however you try
For heaven finds you from the cries of the heart
Then growing through gladness its praises impart
For whatever our suffering our weakness or strife
When we share all we are with the others in life
We rebuild ourselves in the love and the grace
At one with creation that gives us our place.

Then heaven is never a goal we'll achieve
It comes only from faith and the will to believe
But could heaven be true or is it solely in mind?
It is only through death such an answer we'll find
And should heaven be false we will never detect
For we'd have nothing left to confirm it's correct
But the heaven that comes in our heavenly birth
Is true to the heaven we make here on earth.

21 September 1996

REFLECTION

There is an enormous gap between the earlier poems of despair in this series and this one of heaven. That gap can only be crossed once hope is created. Christianity as with other religions creates the framework for that hope and that also includes the promises joy and fulfilment in the afterlife to come. This hope is expressed in the Comfortable Words in the Christian Tradition: "*So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life*". We have seen in the earlier poems that despair and guilt do not only arise when we have done something wrong. They also arise when we have not been able to live up to the expectations which we enforce upon our own selves or are demanded of us by others. In Matthew 11 verses 28 to 30 Jesus says "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*" Words are without meaning when no action is taken and it is the responsibility of all of us who are able, to put these promises into effect.

But what about the promise of heaven itself? Christianity imagines Jesus and God as human personifications, but in this analysis, God can be represented in purely abstract terms, as the essence of Love. Our imaginations are bounded by thoughts and experiences which lie within chronological time, but the images of heaven which we are given by Jesus, and those in the Old Testament describe a certainty which lies outside it. Like Jesus, we can create our own parables of heaven, but these are also within the same time limits, and cannot be complete accounts. Other people will create their personal images. These images may have many elements in common but no two will be alike. There are many epithets and parables to guide us. In the Wisdom of Solomon 2:23: we read that "*For God created man to be immortal and made him to be an image of his own eternity*" and in Colossians 1:15 we read about Jesus and the Kingdom of Love: "*who is the image*

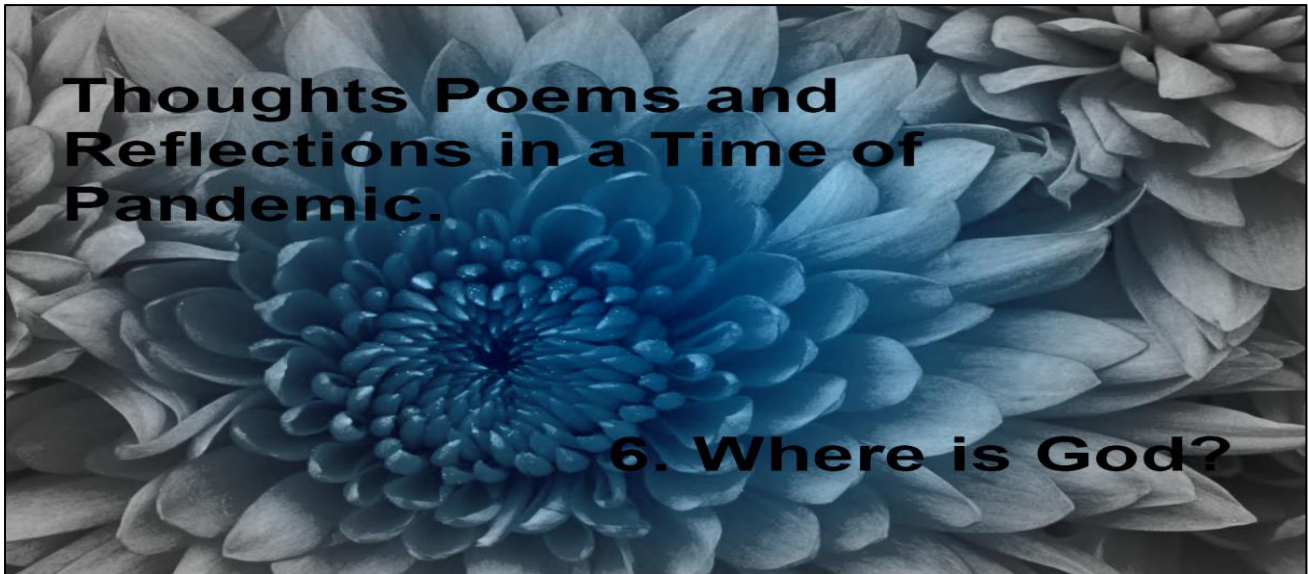
of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation". The seven heavens in religious or mythological cosmology described in the Bible identify seven levels or divisions of Heaven. The concept, derived from ancient Mesopotamian religions, can be found in all the Abrahamic religions such as Islam, Judaism and Christianity. A similar concept is found in some Indian religions such as Hinduism. Islam bans any pictures of a living being. In Judaism God was considered so holy his name could not be fully spelled out or spoken, nor could any physical image be provided, instead He is found in the burning bush, or described in abstract terms, such as the God of Love, or the still small voice.

For all these reasons, a simple vision of Heaven based on chronological expectations cannot suffice. This means that we must create our own images, which make use of these allegories. People may find the visions of heaven described by St John the Divine in the book of Revelation very inspiring and relevant for their purpose, but for these reasons they should not be considered universal. When we recognise this, we can better understand their use in this book, which was to convey messages to the Churches. Historically there are other people such as Swedenborg and Joseph Smith who have tried to propagate their own visions as bases for a universal belief.

A further but less usual source which supports the concept of a heaven which lies outside time, is the Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. However, it is important to note that this Gospel is not being used here as sacred scripture. In line with the approach I am adopting with all religious texts in these reflections, this Gospel is treated entirely as a secular and independent text. See the postscript for more details. The themes in the Gospel; and in my poem do have a commonality, even though this poem was written long before I ever looked at the Gospel for this purpose. The penultimate verse in particular: *"Heaven is not here, in the earth or the sky; And you will never find heaven however you try; For heaven finds you from the cries of the heart; Then growing through gladness its praises impart"*, is strongly expressed in this Gospel.

Other areas are relevant to these reflections and the first two lines of the next verse of the poem *"Then heaven is never a goal we'll achieve; It comes only from faith and the will to believe"* may be relevant to these arguments. Here a little bit of theology is needed. The doctrines of justification by faith or by works.... and by implication entry into heaven, caused disputes in the early Church. The doctrine of justification by faith asserts that it is because of their faith that believers are forgiven, rather than for the good works they have done. Paul strongly argued for this doctrine of justification by faith, but James, (in the Epistle of James), placed much greater emphasis on good works. In Matthew 13:33 Jesus told his disciples a parable, which also appears in Luke 13:20-21: *"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."* *"Again, he asked, 'What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."* This parable appears as saying 96 in the Gospel of Thomas. Saying 97.... which immediately follows it states: *"The kingdom of the Father is like a woman who is carrying a jar filled with flour. While she was walking on the way, very distant from home, the handle of the jar broke and the flour leaked out onto the path. But she did not know it; she had not noticed a problem. When she reached her house, she put the jar down on the floor and found it empty."* Although Saying 96 appears in the Gospel texts Saying 97 does not. When these two parables are taken together the working of the flour is compared with its loss. This parable demonstrates that the Kingdom of Heaven will be lost if care is not taken to maintain its demands. The same theme is present in sayings 11, 24, 40, 41, 50, 61, and 70 of the Gospel of Thomas. According to these texts, justification is not by the statements of faith, or by the good works argued over by James and Paul, but by the degree of care and commitment to the Gospel message and to the love it presents. It is an ongoing obligation which does not depend on how much or how little work can be carried out, and nobody is excluded if no work can be done. Regardless of the authenticity or otherwise of the Gospel of Thomas, this is a decision I come to in the poem itself.

Jesus said "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid". We ask or pray that we will all find that peace.



Thoughts Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic.

6. Where is God?

Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic. Number 6: Where is God

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these *"Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic"*. I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek.

When there is so much unfair and cruel suffering in the world, people often find it difficult to believe that any Loving God could exist. There is a further barrier to overcome. Christianity claims to offer peace and relief which is open to all... but we do not find that peace and relief unless we ask for it. In Luke, Chapter 11 verse 9-10, Jesus says *"And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened"*. Therefore, no door will be opened if people do not knock. In the previous poems, we have seen how guilt, fear and rejection have created barriers which may be hard to overcome. Furthermore, opening a door and stepping through it is moving from one environment into another and being able to face the challenges that brings. People need to find the courage, hope and belief in the face of suffering to take that step, no matter how great the welcome beyond it may be. It is the duty of us all to provide that support.

Some people on their own do seek hope at times of distress and crisis. That is often seen in an increasing search for hope, spirituality, and the security that that religion can offer. For others that leads to a withdrawal, where misery, despair and thoughts of suicide take over their lives. Still others may seek to hide from all challenges in attempts to escape. In this poem I seek to respond to some of these issues. I examine suffering, how unfair it often is, and how it affects our lives

WHERE IS GOD?

Where is God?
I fear to look
For in the distance I might see
Not God, who loves me as I am
But how I've hidden God from me

Is this the God?
The God of Hate
In battles fought by people's tribes
No this is God, the God of Love
Who welcomes all; and heals divides.

How could God?
Who in this world;
Permits the hunger, hurt and pain
Yet in our struggles, toil and strife
Help us all to live again

Who is God?
Who stands beyond:
Assessing all I think and do
Or is it God who lives this life?
Fulfilling all I seek in me

What is God?
The Lord most High
Dispensing justice to the world?
What I now see is God who hurts
To heal the weakness true to me

Is this our God?
Who makes us one
When in the death of his only Son
Expressed on the cross on which He died
We find the peace His love provides

17 September 2016

REFLECTION

This poem asks the question "Why do people suffer?" Since Christianity and all religions accept the interplay of light and darkness in terms of good and evil, it should not be surprising that suffering occurs. Some religions may personalise the divine forces or powers which drive suffering and goodness in terms of Satan and God, others may describe them in terms of pure essences of good and evil instead. Yet others may define them in purely secular terms. However, we do not create evil alone. Evil is created when our actions attack or destroy the wellbeing of our own communities, and groups that are deemed to be outside them. Thus, the need for religious belief is not driven by science and philosophy, it is driven by the communal need to find a deeper meaning to life.

What religious beliefs, both sacred and secular do is to identify explanations for these powers beyond what science or philosophy can ever prove, no matter great their capabilities of analysis and deduction become. That is the essence of faith: for it is the pro-active nature of faith and commitment which empowers, and it is science and reason that checks. The nature of this empowerment encourages people to work for the greatest good, but when faith and commitment is misused or misplaced the greatest evil may be found. Some of the most destructive religious and secular movements in society have been created when this faith has been misplaced, where the creation of tribal and social divisions is justified by its misplacement and is also enforced. When that happens some of the greatest suffering which is encountered by innocent people occurs.

What should be a greater concern is the unfairness with which suffering is applied, either through the cruelty fundamental to nature and evolution, including the illnesses, chronic pain, mental

anguishes, and disabilities created without fault, which people face. The argument that the sins of the fathers are visited on their children in the Ten Commandments does not help. The miracle working ministry of Jesus is presented as evidence of how suffering may be relieved. However, suffering does not end for others, and these miracles are presented in the bible as a demonstration of the power of faith in the ministry of Jesus on earth. Therefore, innocent people do not only suffer just because of the actions of others. The processes of evolution provide other areas where unfair suffering takes place. Nevertheless, suffering is present in the world because it is needed, since it is also a protective mechanism built into our existence to prevent us doing ourselves harm, and ensuring we avoid other situations where harm to us could occur. All religions work from a base which recognises evil and the abilities of nature to shape our lives. Rather than asking questions about why does suffering exist? and why is it so unfair? perhaps the questions we should ask are about how can it be minimised? and how can it be removed?

We have seen that in the Gospels Jesus says: *“And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened”*. In this passage, one might concentrate on the rewards of an inner peace, heaven, and the after-life that is offered for those who do knock the door. For that to happen people also need to have the confidence to find the door, seek the hope that lies beyond it, and want to knock. As we have seen, that may be more difficult for people who are trapped with no hope in a web of misery and despair. In my poem *“Where is God?”* some of the concerns I encountered are described. Like many people, how could I give any credence to a God who allowed such evil and unfair suffering into the world?

The Gospels suggest that the disciples of Jesus might have had similar difficulties. This passage on knocking on the door appears in Matthew 7:7 and in Luke 11.9. However, it is repeated in saying 94 in the Gospel of Thomas. Again, I emphasise that the Gospel of Thomas is not being used here as sacred scripture, it is treated entirely as a secular and independent text. Thus, in the accepted Gospels we read of how the hope and expectations of the disciples were crushed at the time of the crucifixion, and how that door only flung fully open for them because of their later realisation and their searing conviction that the resurrection of Jesus had occurred. The passage only occurs once in each of the Gospels, but it is directly or indirectly referred to in sayings 2, 38, 59, 92 and 94 in the Gospel of Thomas, which perhaps gives a more detailed description of how this journey of discovery may have been made. Here a more stuttering realisation takes place.

No religion claims to eliminate suffering. But the ability to accept the reality of this love for those who suffer, and the ability to give it for those who provide support, can enable the calm and security which allows suffering to be healed, reduced or endured.

According to our own beliefs we ask or pray for the spirit of hope which breaks down all barriers and brings us to the knowledge..... however we may express it, of the true essence of Love. Grant that through faith and hope we may find ways of resolving or better managing the suffering that many of us must endure. Give us the faith which helps us to find the positive things in life and not to dwell on the negative things instead. Let us know that we are loved for who we are, regardless of what we do, and also to know that when we knock, the door will be fully opened, and that we may find life in its fullness instead.



Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic. Number 7: Anger

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these *"Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic"*. I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek

There are three reasons why we might feel anger and guilt. One is because we have done something wrong, the second is because we have evaded our responsibilities, and the third is because of the guilt imposed on us simply because we do not conform to what society expects. In the poem *"The Dark Hole"* I describe some of the trauma I have encountered and here I describe some of the anger that it creates.

ANGER 2

There's a great deal of anger I have to release
Before I'll relax and can then find my peace
There's anger at fate that it gave me the strife
Of a conflict I've countered for all of my life.

There's anger with God from religion's demands
With the misdiagnoses their decrees commands
For it is not by desires or the search for a role
Just the need to be me to make my life whole

There's anger with "experts" who chose to advise
With theories they state and a past they surmise
And anger when this did not back my own view
On how I could follow the course I'd pursue.

There's anger with those who did not embrace
Their own inner pressures they needed to face
And anger because I would hide my own strife
By bearing their burdens within my own life.

There's anger with others for forcing collapse
For it was not this conflict that started relapse
And anger with me when I could not withstand
The compulsive drives of its inner command

There's anger endured in facades I enforce
To conform to the life I'm required to endorse
And the anger I face from self's drive to reject
The whole role I have built and fully respect.

There's anger with willpower and all it decrees
When it seeks to dismiss the self that it sees
And anger at self for the hurt and the strain
From the need to express the life I'd attain.

There's anger with anger at what these can do
To all of the life which I want to work through
And the anger expressed at my own inner pride
In assuming these things can all be defied.

There's anger absolved in the freedom to build
A life which is true and is also fulfilled
The anger which looks to the things I must see
And in this finds the way to let me be me.

November 1994

REFLECTION

This poem describes a problem with identity and not desire: It is not the search for a role and instead of looking for reward, it is driven by rejection instead. My own view and the experiences, which I describe in the poem, are entirely in accord with the great majority of the professional medical institutions throughout the world, the World Health Organisation and all of the other international bodies who deal with these issues. Unfortunately, there is disagreement on these matters. The dispute is promoted by certain religious traditions and other groups who interpret these situations as conflicts arising from a hidden pursuit of desire and reward. At the heart of this is the disagreement as to whether socialisation precedes identification, or if the reverse occurs. That has a crucial effect, which I will now explain

If socialisation precedes identification, the identity that is created depends entirely on the social pressures that people are exposed to. When that does not conform to usual expectations, it is argued that a disruption to the normal path of development takes place, and that this disruption is driven by hidden and misplaced pursuits of desire and reward. When that is believed to be true, the methods of management and treatment include aversion and conversion procedures which aim to eliminate the deviant behaviour this identification is understood to create. These actions are intended to restore identification to the normally expected pattern of development which is considered to exist before the presumed acts of disruption took place, Religious groups who take this approach might try to *"pray away the sin"*.

However, if the sense of identity is created before the social pressures begin to take effect, no other sense of identity is formed: and this means there is none that can be restored. Crucially this means that instead of behaviour and desire being the driving forces behind these patterns of development, the powers which drive them are those of rejection and identification instead. Early neural patterns of development ensure that the key or core elements of identification become fixed in place before conscious awareness occurs. Prior to some crisis exposing them, these may be hidden from the conscious mind. It is notable that children develop the senses of social awareness from around the age of two. However, they do not tend to enforce the social differentiations arising from this until they reach the age of about three years. In my own research I show that identification takes place before socialisation occurs.

Taking the correct approach is crucial for the methods of managing personality variations and personality disruptions are almost opposite to each other. Aversion and conversion methods do enormous harm because there is nothing to restore; and they create a great deal of instability since they leave a vacuum inside. That is why the great majority of professional medical and health institutions throughout the world have come together to totally condemn these approaches. These have now been made illegal in some countries, and strongly worded statements condemning them have also been issued. Nevertheless, for their own reasons and agendas, certain religious and secular pressure groups continue to pursue the dogmas that these are issues which are driven by a hidden pursuit of power, desire, and reward. This is despite the evidence of science, the views of virtually all the major professional medical institutions, and the experiences of people like me, who must deal with these concerns.

The current medical consensus is that these are natural variations of personality and identity which are present from a very early stage and cannot be changed in later life. The opposite point of view is that these are disruptions of personality and identity. Scientific proof for that opposing point of view is often sought on the grounds that the origins are not well understood. Many people try to fight, hide, or suppress this often self-hidden, identity by conforming ever more strongly to the stereotypes that are expected of them until collapse occurs. However, attempts at fighting and suppression do not work for the inability to find a secure base increases the strength of the demand. The pain and suffering created can be measured by the high degrees of trauma that are experienced, the very large rates of suicide, attempted suicide, and the contemplations of suicide that exist. My poem "The Dark Hole" (No. 4) describes some of the extremities of the trauma and the runaway drive that is found. Techniques appropriate to personality variation instead of disruption must be used. That means accepting and welcoming the reality of identity, celebrating what it brings, and seeking to use it in a positive way. And for this the creation of self-acceptance and self-esteem is required.

That is the approach I have adopted. I have followed the best medical advice. I am extensively involved in helping others to gain their own self-acceptance and to deal with the guilt and anger that is created by the misdiagnoses, the attacks on integrity of identity, the misrepresentation of motives, the abuses, the rejections and the violence that is faced. Also, the guilt heaped on people because they cannot conform to what others demand. Sadly, these disagreements have now descended into toxic disputes where virtually all senses of responsibility and objectivity have been lost. It is now time for everyone to examine their own social, political, and religious agendas, and to test their own arguments against what the best of science can tell us: not to use it selectively to prove their own dogmas, for there is anger, accusation, slander, and misrepresentation on all sides.

The poem is not just or even primarily about my own concerns. It is about anger and the need to work through it, for anger unresolved only festers inside. I have conducted extensive research into the underlying nature and causes of these disturbances, and that work is fully written up elsewhere.

In this world of anger, accusation, and misrepresentation we ask or pray according to our beliefs that instead of fighting, shouting and blaming each other, people find ways to respect each other, listen to each other, learn from each other, and find common ground. We ask or pray for help and willingness to recognise and accept our own angers and work through them to find ways of peace.



Thoughts Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic.

8. Guilt

Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic. Number 8: Guilt

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these *"Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic"*. I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek.

One of the most destructive and treacherous ways of attacking an enemy is to heap guilt on the person concerned over who they are, what they do and what they believe. In this poem I examine how we take that guilt upon ourselves and its destructive effect.

If we truly have done something wrong, we must fully bear that guilt. However, the attacks on our own senses of self-esteem and self-worth can be even more devastating when, because of the actions and accusations of others, we are made to feel that we have done something wrong or irresponsible, even when we truly believe have been behaving according to ethical standards which are unequivocally the best we can manage and are morally, socially and physically correct.

I consider both these issues in this poem.

GUILT

Hidden and unheard, guilt comes
Reclusive and malign, guilt strikes
Or through a blazing fire guilt burns
Its anguish marked it wrecks it fights
Its partner blame must set its course
To revel through destruction's force.

Yet guilt can give the warning shout
Take care! Beware! Peruse your course
Redress the force of blame and doubt
From actions past that cause remorse
For guilt assuaged can clear our way
Through all we do and see and say.

Guilt is God of "Should have been"
The force that says you must succeed
The spectre sensed of failures seen
This vampire of perfection's creed
When duty sets its cause too high
It sucks both mind and reason dry.

For guilt's escape we turn to blame
Diverting guilt that's ours to face
Or inwards bend our minds to frame
Its driving power of self-disgrace
Then guilt we find will set its grip
On what we know but can't accept.

The guilt we feel for what we are
Destroys all hope of peace of mind
But anguish faced in tearful prayer
Can set us free from bonds we find
When self-acceptance gives release
And brings us hope of inner peace.

The guilt we feel for what we do
Is guilt which we are right to fear
For we must own a guilt that's true
Before we'll make the future clear
To see the peace of mind we greet
When guilt's atonement is complete.

12 September 1996

REFLECTION

This is the first of two poems that go together, the next poem, on Forgiveness, describes how we might manage and deal with guilt. Guilt, anger, and blame are fellow travellers in any crisis. If we are truly to become free from their clutches all of these must be worked through together: they cannot be suppressed, denied, or ignored.

This is also a two-way process. If other people impose guilt, anger, and blame on us, we are just as likely to throw guilt, anger, and blame on them in return. This then becomes a tit-for-tat process where always increasing guilt, anger, and blame is imposed by both sides. Having the ability to forgive is one way of breaking the cycle, but many people cannot forgive, nor can it be asked or expected of them. What we must do is to break the cycles of retribution that are created.

According to our beliefs, we ask or pray that we can find ways of escaping from the cycles of retribution, guilt, blame and anger, no matter how just or unjust these may be. Instead of seeing those who heap such accusations upon us as enemies, let us seek ways to make them friends.



**Thoughts Poems and
Reflections in a Time of
Pandemic.**

9. Forgiveness

Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic.
Number 9: Forgiveness

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these *"Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic"*. I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek.

It has been said that an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is the way that honour is preserved in society. Any sign of giving way may be seen to be weakness or capitulation. Often pride or fear of loss of honour, power, influence, or authority prevents those who would give way from doing so. The act of forgiveness is a way of breaking the cycle. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting the wrong that is done or the consequences of it. Many people find it impossible to forgive, and nobody should be criticised for this. What forgiveness does do, when it is genuinely meant, is to release guilt and to enable people to make a new start. It does not disregard the original cause. This poem follows on from the previous poem and reflection. It begins by considering how growth may be gained by guilt's release, and how that new start may be made

FORGIVENESS

Growth we gain by guilt's release
Arises from the hope that's seen
When harmony brings inner peace
And sense of worth the self esteem
That makes us free to set our role
And gain a life that's fully whole.

But human nature lacks the power
To steer the perfect course we seek
So guilt's dynamics then will scar
Our lives with blame for each defeat
Yet with forgiveness and in grace
We may give guilt a proper place.

Forgiveness does not say forget
Instead it brings the future course
Where guilt's atonement can be met
Within the power that we engross
So freed from inner guilt to bind
We may rebuild the lives we find.

And we must know we are forgiven
Or that we've fully paid the price
To cancel grief our guilt has riven
And find the peace we seek in life
But we shall never gain this prize
Unless repentance rules our lives.

The trauma our dissention swells
Finds true power in guilt we face
But when we show we too forgive
With penitence we find the grace
To know that guilt must only test
To see if we have done our best.

Then with our lives we seek ideals
That lie beyond our power to gain
So self-forgiveness when each fails
Becomes the goal we can't maintain
Yet life will shine with peace we set
Once God's forgiveness we accept.

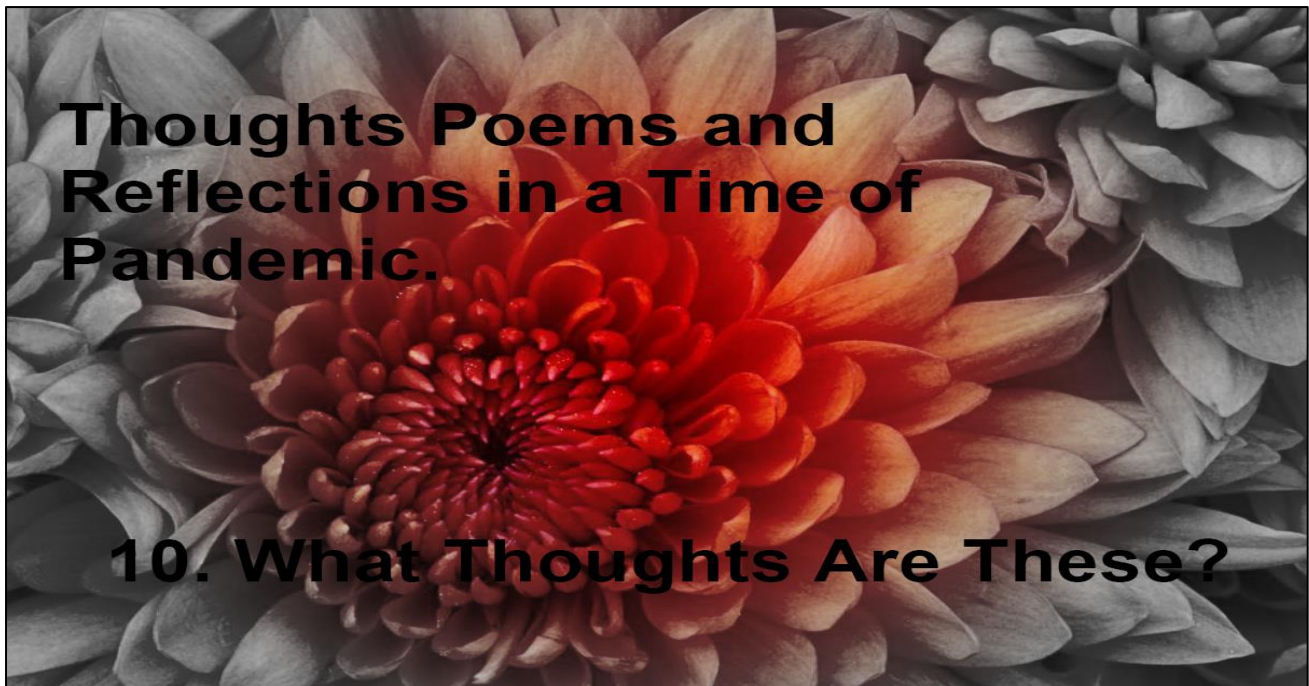
16 September 1996

REFLECTION

I have stated previously that, although I make considerable use of religious scriptures in this account, I am using them in a secular way. The word "God" in this poem is used to describe a power which is beyond our personal selves. Although the word is often used to describe a supreme being in a religious context, it need not be expressed in supernatural terms. It can also describe a fount or essence of love. In the poem "Religion" (Number 11), I will examine why this is.

In the Christian Gospel, Matthew (18: 21-22) states: *"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'"* In the Lord's Prayer we read *"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"*. In Matthew (22:27-39) Jesus said: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets"*. Although these texts are taken from the Christian Gospel, the same themes are common to all religions, and it is in this spirit of love and forgiveness we should seek to live our lives.

Let us ask or pray according to our own beliefs that we may be able to forgive others without limit, and that we can build our lives in this spirit of universal and inclusive love, which we share with all people, and is common to all of us whatever we believe and however we live our lives.



Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic. Number 10: What Thoughts are These?

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these "*Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic*". I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek.

In the previous poems I have described some of the barriers we place upon ourselves and others. In each of these I have described some of the problems, blindness, and prejudices we may all encounter: either through our own actions and behaviour, or from the actions and behaviour of others.

In those poems I suggest ways to overcome the difficulties and the despair that may be found. In this next poem "*What Thoughts are These*", I describe something of my own approach and how, instead of hiding from these problems, I have tried to use them in a way which has helped me, and I hope helps others, to take a positive approach. I offer them now in that same spirit.

WHAT THOUGHTS ARE THESE?

What thoughts are these?
That lie behind those eyes
A tree of mind
Branching upwards towards the skies
And downwards towards the roots
From whence it came
Of futures past
And past things yet to come.

What thoughts to fear?
From shaking of this tree of mind
Grafted to roots
That would bear fruit of another kind
And yearning for this base
Sow conflict's yoke
Upon my life
To scourge myself and all my hope.

What thoughts to share?
My memories of the early shoots
Of childish hopes
Fresh sprung on the ground to soak
The dew of life and build
One's own creation
On happy times
And on a fresh love tended core.

What thoughts to find?
For peace of mind in future times
This tree of mind
Which reaching upwards to the skies
Finds nutrition in the light
To heal the wounds
And live anew
Embracing self and all mankind.

January 1994

REFLECTION

Some of us have had the misfortune to have had to explore our own minds more deeply than others to better come to terms with who we are, seek self-esteem, and to endorse what we feel ourselves to be. This journey includes dealing with fear, anxiety, worry, rejection, depression, and all the many facades we enforce. That is also my own experience and I have written poetry to help me chart my way through this journey. My journey may have been more challenging, but it is an ongoing journey that everyone makes.

Anxiety and worry are now two of the biggest challenges arising from lockdown and the corona virus, and it is predicted that the mental trauma created by these are likely to last for decades to come. It is this concern which has led me to try to re-purpose the poems I wrote at a time when I was trying to deal with my personal crises in order to provide insights into what might be relevant to the issues that now arise. Almost all these poems date from that time. That is also true of this poem "*What Thoughts are These?*" I must admit that I had doubts about including that poem in this anthology, for the words may seem a little cliched when we are now in the midst of the crisis. However, I have included it as a sign of belief that future fulfilment will be found in all our lives when these times of crises have passed.

According to our own beliefs, let us ask or pray that at, and from, this time of crises and unknowing we may find ways to transform anxiety into calmness, worry into comfort, fear into hope, depression into fulfilment, endings into beginnings, and instead of fearing a darkness ahead, we may transform it into the light of life.



Thoughts Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic.

11. Religion

Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic. Number 11: Religion

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these *“Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic”*. I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek.

Religion today is often given a very bad name. People see its misuse in the reinforcement of tribal, gender, sexual and racial discrimination and their identities, its use in supporting genocide, the hypocrisy of people claiming to practice a gospel or mission of love yet doing the opposite in the action they take. Also, the ways in which it is used to defy science in pursuit of partisan aims, and its use as a tool for damnation against people who do not support the aims or agendas of its own tribal, social or religious group.

Religion may be sacred or secular. In both cases it becomes a religion when it places the doctrines it believes in for its own moral justification above anything else. My view of religion is that contains the powers for the greatest of evils as well as the power for the greatest of good. In my poem on “Religion” I explore both these areas.

RELIGION

What religions profess is a goodness and power
Through sharing with others, it asks who we are
Then uses our innermost thoughts in our minds
To fulfil and give peace to those lives it defines.

Its existence is something no science can test
For it's found in our minds, in love in each breast
But science and logic give methods which check
The goals which they follow are truly correct

With a goodness too great for us to achieve
Its acts come from faith and the will to believe
For some it is observed as the essence of love
For others; its viewed as a power from above.

Thus, heaven must lie in a place outside time
Beyond what our minds could search to define
So, stories and parables become what we seek
To endorse creation and make life complete.

But this also entraps in the guilt and the blame
For the goals we would seek but could not attain
In Christian tradition, Christ's death on the cross
Gave that forgiveness which came at great cost.

This welcomes all people, whoever we are,
For no person's denied its love and its power
But we betray its meaning; and what it's about
When creeds we decree then keep people out

We distance ourselves by facades we enforce
Which hide our true selves in lives we endorse
So we also trap others through hurt and the pain
By destroying esteem in the lives they'd attain.

And evil that comes from misplacing its force
Can become even worse in lives we'd endorse
For claiming these views have divine command
Brings greatest of evils the world can withstand.

These evils are what we are called to reject
When we live our lives true to its loving effect
That also needs courage to stand and embrace
The truth of a message that puts love in place.

For some we may picture religion's true force
Through an image of God in a place we endorse
For others it come through the essence we seek
In a Godhead of Love that makes life complete.

21 May 2020

REFLECTION

One of the features that often occurs in times of crisis is that people turn more towards religious belief. At these times we will often come together to seek a common good in communities which involve everyone in seeking the solace which religion can bring. In situations where people perceive that religion is creating the greatest of evils, the greatest of good is often being expressed by those within the same communities, who work for reconciliation and peace. That range of experience is reflected in this poem. Religion is also much more than the stories and beliefs that are found in the sacred texts, for these are just ways of expressing the deeper truths which cannot be expressed in images or words. In these poems and reflections, I use material taken from the Christian gospel and traditions to make these points. These tell of the history of Israel and Christ's divinity, and the searing conviction of the reality of the Resurrection of Jesus, as seen by the Apostles, after it had occurred. Other religions have their own stories to tell.

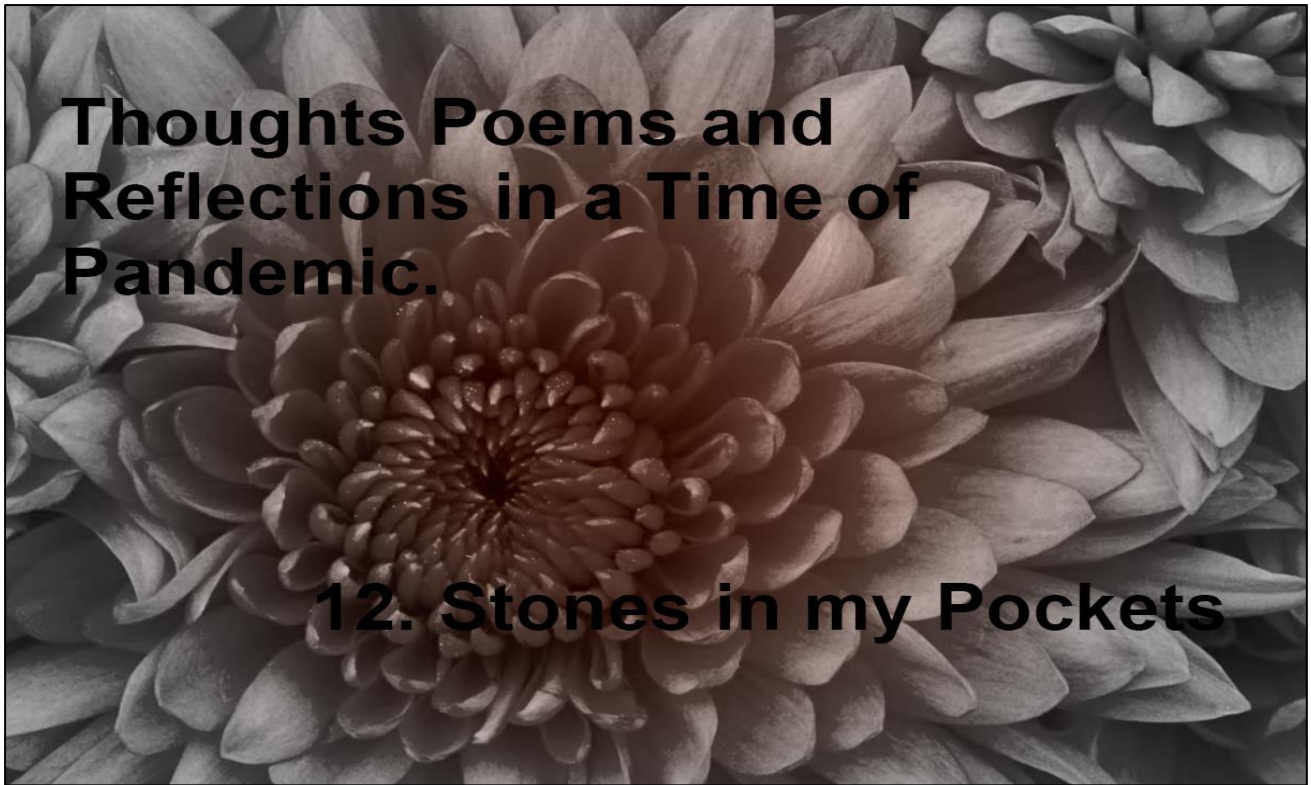
One of the first questions that every religious code or ethic should be required to answer is “*Why is it needed?*” If none of us feel the need to believe in it, it is not likely to succeed. A fresco by Michaelangelo in the Sistene Chapel in Rome shows a human figure representing God reaching out to another human figure representing humanity, so that their index fingers almost touch. We might also see this as the figure of God representing the perfection that is given, and the human figure which symbolizes our search for the perfection we seek. Our religious codes and ethics are built from the top down by embracing the ideals, codes, lives, and ethics we aspire to. The codes we create for ourselves are built from the bottom up, and these are based on our experiences, knowledge, science, philosophy, and reasoning, which we create. That will always be the case no matter how great our expertise in these areas becomes. Thus, when they at their best, it is religion that inspires, and it is knowledge, science, philosophy, and reasoning that checks.

We do not create good and evil alone. Evil is created when our actions attack or destroy the wellbeing of our own communities and groups which we deem to be outside them: Good is created when these are supported. Instead of treating religious belief as a moral arbiter for our own lives, it becomes the common moral arbiter for the whole community. That imposes authority over every person in the community and we shape ourselves to conform to its beliefs. When that is set by purely secular values it is more easily disrupted by any tensions that occur. A constant code of ethics is more easily maintained through a religious belief.

I make very extensive use of Christian texts in this compilation, but I have not presumed a belief in a divine being, or that heaven exists, even the poems on the Music Trees and Heaven do not do that. It has also been said that if God did not exist, we would need to invent him, her, or it, to justify our beliefs. In the Epistles Paul declares that Christianity would be in vain if the Resurrection had not taken place. But arguments about this are separate from the message it brings. This message is about the power of faith and belief to maintain the constancy of the Gospel of Christian Love and the ethics it presents against disruptions that take place. Even if these stories were not to be true in the literal sense, the power of the Resurrection story and the message of Christianity, as it means to us, should stay just the same. In this poem I try to show that for everyone, believer in any religion or believer in none, the message that is presented seeks the same true place. This is a story of conviction, of self-sacrificing love, loving our neighbours as ourselves, a love that we all should share without any exception, and with the same intensity, for the goodness, the care, and the support which it brings to every part of the world.

The only demand that is placed on us is that we keep our commitment to this message, regardless of what we can achieve. In the well-known “*Serenity poem*” we read “*Give us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference*”. Concepts of self and self-identity are never static, they always change, and depend greatly on how we relate to others. I use the description of true selves in this poem. By referring to true selves and identities I am referring to those features which we find we cannot change and also those which can. It our acceptance of these, our attempts to fulfil them, and the certain knowledge that we are accepted as we are, which makes us able to touch most closely our inner selves and bring peace to our lives.

According to our own beliefs we ask or pray that we may truly become aware of that conviction of goodness and self-sacrificing love which is present in all religious beliefs and traditions. Provide us with the strength and courage to work to bring that same love into the world so that all people of all races, ethnicities, creeds, sexual orientation, gender identities and different abilities, who seek to live lives in ways which are true to their own identities may work and live content and in full inclusion with all, for this goodness and peace.



Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic. Number 12: Stones in My Pocket

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these *"Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic"*. I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek

The idea for this poem came from a meditation exercise where we were given three stones to consider. It examines three different facades we may present in our lives, but by choosing the one who most fully acknowledges our weaknesses, strengths and abilities we may best find fulfilment in the beliefs we possess and in the ways in which we conduct our lives.

STONES IN MY POCKETS

In my pockets three stones rest
And give my journey's path I see
In pictures gained within my mind
Which shine in meditation bound
To share their stories true to me.

The first finds granite sharply set
Impelling shape to roughened face
With darkest speckles shining forth
That set in clouded pale shorn rock
Forces form and strength to base.

The second stone I'd now peruse
Well rounded, shiny, water dashed.
Brings time and tide to shape its life
That seeks its place by outer show
Of perfect faces impact-smashed.

The third stone in my pocket now
Has faces shaped by wind and sea
To furrowed hump of dull faced rock
As through its length a crevice runs
To tell us what this stone must be.

Each nugget formed of self I built
Shines like one crystal in its stone
With each one building on the last
They link with granite rock to bind
And sculpt the self beneath I own.

The second stone that I possess
Becomes the self of outside view
I make to match what others want
In chiselled smoothness it impels
To hide from selfhood I'd pursue.

My third stone sets in all its faults
Those features that I wish to hide
But channels opened will disclose
A fitting shape and depth to carve
Foundations that I would provide.

For this stone is the cornerstone
That can match to other's shape
Its roughness too will find the key
To give the mortar binding power
For selfhoods tower I can create.

This is the stone of honest truth
Giving strength to towers I'll build
So with a structure bound to rock
Of matching base on which it sits
The self it sculpts will be fulfilled.

For this is stone we all must use
Each time we raise a future tower
As from foundations to the heights
Its shape invests its total strength
In structures built on who we are.

We must not build in walls of rock
Made alone with unmatched stone
For conflict from their inner shapes
Directs concern to inward thought
Crushing outreach we would own.

Yet buildings must not only shine
Reflecting light from outside walls
For mirrors set with polished stone
Then focus on the outward theme
That must subdue our inner calls.

So if we'll build with faulted stone
The stone the builders may reject
We use forgiveness and our care
To craft in strength so every rock
Can shape the building we erect.

Then in our pockets every stone
Is valued in the church we'll build
To welcome each of every shape
In love that tells of care and hope
So life by joy and peace is filled.

For in a house we shape by love
Our trust will build the inner tower
Where all take in life's fullest view
To gain by grace the self esteem
That makes us true to all we are.

Then of our building look around
Examine all those stones you see
And if this gives a welcome place
For every person life has shaped
So there God's love may truly be.

12 March 2006.

REFLECTION

At the outset I was not certain about what the purpose and outcome of putting this set of poems together would be. It reflects my own journey and the poems reflect my experiences along the way. Like a *"Pilgrim's Progress"* it describes some of the issues I have encountered and how I have tried to resolve their demands. Perhaps this poem *"Stones in My Pocket"* summarises what I have learnt. It is about being able to be who we are, not to be what other people expect of us, and not to condemn or be condemned for other people for what we are not. We are not to be like the housewife of the polished stone who seeks to maintain standards which she believes are expected of her by others and, are impossible to maintain: That is no matter how worthy those standards are. On the other hand we are not to simply be the stone of unshaped granite which falls victim to our own fears and concerns which, like the woman with her elastoplast taped eyes, who is unjustly condemned by others and is someone who faces great anger and distress. The third stone with all its faults is one which reflects upon how we make use of our talents and our responsibilities both to ourselves and to others, in ways which reveal the truth of who we are, not in terms of any success we achieve, but in the ways we commit ourselves to living our lives.

In the poem I compare the sense of selfhood to a tower we create which grows taller as our lives progress. However, the tower's stability depends on the strength of its foundation. If its foundations are weak or not correctly set, the tower will collapse. This story of course is comparable to the parable of Jesus who talks about a house built on sand which will fall down, and one built on rock which will not. In this analogy, as the tower grows taller it will be more prone to collapse. Yet this

third stone, the stone of honest truth: *“the faulted stone, the stone the builders may reject”* is the one that builds the strongest tower. The last verse in the poem states *“Then of our building look around, examine all those stones you see, and if this gives a welcome place for every person life has shaped, so there God’s love may truly be”*. That is the richness we should expect. I break with convention in the way I deal with my own issues, yet through this journey I know that I am accepted for being who I am when I live my life in a way that is true to my own identity and without any diminution of the moral standards and responsibilities I possess. See the poem on Anger (No 7) for a description of some of the issues I have had to face. Reaching this understanding has not been easy, and these poems describe the various trials I have encountered. These experiences led me to question my own sense of identity. The failure to obtain this sense of acceptance has destroyed the lives for many in the same situation, for it strikes in the same way at the foundation stone upon which our towers of selfhood are built... failure of the foundation leads to failure of the tower and that too easily leads to total and catastrophic collapse.

We have seen that one effect of the current corona virus pandemic and the consequent lockdown, is that of depriving everyone of social interaction. The loss of communication, income, and lack of interaction with family, friends and others, throws us into a world of worry, anxiety uncertainty, social and economic deprivation, loneliness, and isolation, where the possibility of our own deaths seems closer than we might otherwise expect. A major concern is the harm that this will do to our abilities to interact with others after the lockdown ends. Medical practitioners and researchers are already predicting that there will be major long term effects on mental health which will last for years to come. My first response is to say that it is OK to have these feelings. Accept them and use them to build the strongest tower. None of us are perfect, no one should expect us to be perfect and if Christianity plays an important part in your lives you will be aware of the passage in Matthew 21:42. *“Then Jesus asked them, “Didn’t you ever read this in the Scriptures? ‘The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing, and it is wonderful to see”*

So, in our building look around, examine all those stones you see, and if this gives a welcome place, for every person life has shaped then, there God’s love may truly be. According to our own beliefs we ask or pray that we may be able to welcome everyone equally in our lives. We ask or pray that all of us without exception may find this love and light in our lives. We ask or pray that we are accepted and loved for who we are. That in the whole of society with all its diversity we may use the stones of many types to build a welcome for all, with this full inclusion wholly in place in our communities, in our societies, and in all the world.



Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic. Postscript

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these *“Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic”*. I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek

In these reflections I use the Gospel of Thomas purely because it claims to be an account of the sayings of Jesus. I report them only because of the insights they might give. No other historical or theological meaning is attached and none of these reflections or poems presume or expect anyone to have a religious belief. In this account the Christian Gospel is not treated as a sacred text. However, large numbers of people do have religious beliefs and great harm has been created because of the scapegoating and condemnation which has taken place, and still takes place because of the misplaced presumptions that are made on the grounds of particular religious beliefs, by sections of the Christian Church and by other faiths and religious groups. The medical and psychological misdiagnoses promoted by certain sections of society because of their pursuit of their own social agendas similarly cause great feelings of anger, rejection, and guilt. I do not discuss these matters further in this series of reflections because their purpose is to consider how we can best manage the challenges and tensions that arise during this time of pandemic. However, I do examine these issues separately in other work.

When I state that religion has the power to create the greatest evil in the world as well as the greatest good in these poems and reflections, I take a very critical view of religion and how it is used. In my poem on this topic (No.11), I state that: when it is at its best, it is religion that inspires, but it is knowledge, science, philosophy, and reasoning which checks. I also note this pattern will always remain, no matter how good the science, philosophy, and reasoning can ever become. Despite this, theology often seeks to define the science it expects. Far too often theology attempts to subvert science for its own purposes through its refusal or its inability to check. In my poem on

Anger (No.7) I describe some of the experiences that this creates. That has been part of the history of the Christian Churches and other religions throughout the Centuries. Religion can also create the greatest evil in the world through its support for tribal identities, and because of its development of creeds, codes and beliefs that keep people out. It is only when religion includes love for all people that the greatest good can be found. When that happens, religion asks more than reason expects, which is love for each other in all of our acts.

This document can be accessed at: www.com.tgdr.co.uk/documents/001C-PandemicThoughts.pdf

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