

WEEKEND GREETINGS FROM THE MINISTER, 2 MAY 2020 . . . AND A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT TWO TYPES OF CLAPPING

Posted on May 2, 2020 by Andrew Brown



Looking back at Lu's balcony

Once again I send all of you greetings and best wishes and I hope, with all caveats applied, that you have been able to get through another week of the lockdown in as good and positive a fashion as is possible.

As in previous weeks I can, with pleasure, pass on to you from those with whom I have spoken their best wishes to one and all and I look forward to speaking with a few more of you next week.

Thank you, too, for all the expressions of condolence you have sent either to me and/or Susanna following Lucy's death. We have both been touched by your kind thoughts.

Before I properly get to the heart of the short piece which follows I need to be clear that I raise the Christian, Palm Sunday idea that triggered this reflection, not to laugh at, or to belittle it (or the person who suggested it), but simply so I can be clear (enough) about something important that the current event through which we are collectively passing is strongly revealing to me. As always, my words here do not assume that you will think I am correct about things in any shape or form. Instead, they are delivered up simply in the hope that they will provoke some of your own thoughts on the matter.

To set the scene properly before getting to the aforementioned Palm Sunday idea I'd like to remind you again of some words by the American existentialist theologian James W. Woelfel who, over the last twenty-odd years, has had a quiet but important influence on my own religious thinking. They are taken from his essay, ["The Death of God: A Belated Personal Postscript" \(Christian Century, December 29, 1976, pp. 1175-1178\)](#)

I hasten to add that I am not so naïve as to think that the demise of the transcendent God within my own interpreted experience entails the universalized conclusion that he does not exist. I have become increasingly impressed by the inescapably contextual character of all our "ultimate concerns." I can appreciate the fact that all sorts of people deal with existence in terms of faith in the sovereign God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. On questions of ultimate meaning, none of us knows for sure who is closer to the mark. But in my own ongoing struggle to make sense of the Christian context of life- and world-interpretation, I find basic elements of that context which I simply cannot render coherent any longer, and I earnestly wonder how other persons manage to.

OK, with this thought in mind I come to my example which popped into my inbox just before the start of Holy Week. A local minister, impressed by people clapping for all our NHS workers, had a dream, a vision if you like:

I woke up last night picturing Christians on their doorsteps, balconies and in their gardens praying and singing to Jesus. Palm Sunday has been playing in my mind.

This local minister felt — quite understandably for a full, Christian believer — that ‘We can do the same to God.’ They went on to say:

This Sunday is Palm Sunday when we normally wave palm branches and parade around and singing, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David, Blessed is he comes in the name of the Lord. Lord, Save us!’ is a great prayer to cry out. Could God’s people do this in isolated togetherness from our homes?

The minister’s hope was that this crying out to ‘our Saviour’ might not only be done at 11am on Palm Sunday but on on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, too, and, perhaps, even every Sunday.

The moment I read the local minister’s words, Woelfel’s came flooding back into my mind because’, like Woelfel, ‘in my own ongoing struggle to make sense of the Christian context of life-and world-interpretation, I find basic elements of that context which I simply cannot render coherent any longer, and I earnestly wonder how other persons manage to.’ Yes, indeed, for I could only earnestly wonder at how on earth in our own age and with the knowledge of the world we have today that that minister is able to believe in the truth of such an idea?

Naturally, I have to accept that they do so believe, but the plain truth is that, for me, there is simply no possibility that I could ever consider standing on my doorstep on a Sunday morning — even during these extremely strange lockdown days — in order to cry out loud, for real and with full pathos (belief) and a clean heart, ‘Hosanna! Lord, Save us!’

In short, that minister’s email served as a striking reminder to me that I have absolutely no sense that there exists any such external God to whom I could cry and who would (or could) ever, as Housman wrote, ‘Bow hither out of heaven and see and save’ (from Housman’s ‘Easter Hymn’ which you’ll find as a postscript below).

But when it comes to clapping our NHS workers (and, by extension all ‘key workers’) with the hope that they may be able to bring us all some kind of ‘salvation’, well that’s another matter. Setting aside for a moment (but keeping it clearly in view) that I have some serious concerns that too many people (especially those in positions of power and influence) will think clapping is enough ([see my piece written for you last weekend](#)), I find myself standing on the balcony of Lu’s flat with Susanna (twice with Lu, and now twice without) crying out loud (in celebration and now also with profound grief) not ‘Hosanna!’, but ‘Huzzah!’, and I have done it with full pathos (belief) and a clean heart. I am clapping for those extraordinary people who, again and again, have bowed hither out of, not the safety of some putative, supernatural heaven, but out of the safety of their own, actual earthly homes. And for their utterly selfless, salvific love I give the greatest of praise and profoundest thanks.

The experience of standing on that balcony applauding for a month of Thursdays has, were it possible, made me more convinced than ever before that only a fully immanent, naturalist and materialist religion is, for me, worth any salt and it is certainly the only one I as your minister can bring before you for consideration. As many of you will already be aware, a fair few of my addresses are attempts at articulating aspects of just such a religion and, should you be minded during the coming week to read one of them, here are just five possibilities for your reconsideration . . .

[**The case for an Ecstatic Humanism—being “skeptics with naturally religious minds” or “open-minded ‘reverent’ humanists”**](#)

[**“What comes after Christianity?” A God who gently but firmly pushes you away from himself in the direction of each other**](#)

[**Mr Chips as an incarnation of a wholly immanent and natural “God”**](#)

[**What else can one do in so-called dark times but offer the civil humanism of neighbourly love?**](#)

[**Mothering Sunday—The maternalizing of matter and the materializing of the mother”—A poetic, supreme fiction for our age**](#)

But whatever you think about my musings from the archive on this matter, I'm sure you will be joining with me on Thursday in offering up your own heartfelt thanks to our NHS workers and all those other key workers who are keeping us going in these challenging times.

With love and best wishes as always,

Andrew

Easter Hymn by A. E. Housman

If in that Syrian garden, ages slain,

You sleep, and know not you are dead in vain,

Nor even in dreams behold how dark and bright

Ascends in smoke and fire by day and night

The hate you died to quench and could but fan,

Sleep well and see no morning, son of man.

But if, the grave rent and the stone rolled by,

At the right hand of majesty on high

You sit, and sitting so remember yet

Your tears, your agony and bloody sweat,

Your cross and passion and the life you gave,

Bow hither out of heaven and see and save.