

# Lift up your hearts

THE PICTURE ART COLLECTION/ALAMY



**Andrew Davison**  
continues our series

**T**WO images have been on prominent display in my house recently. Since Easter, an icon of the descent into hell has pride of place on my dining table. I find Christ's journey among the dead, between his death and resurrection, one of the most moving parts of the celebration of Easter each year.

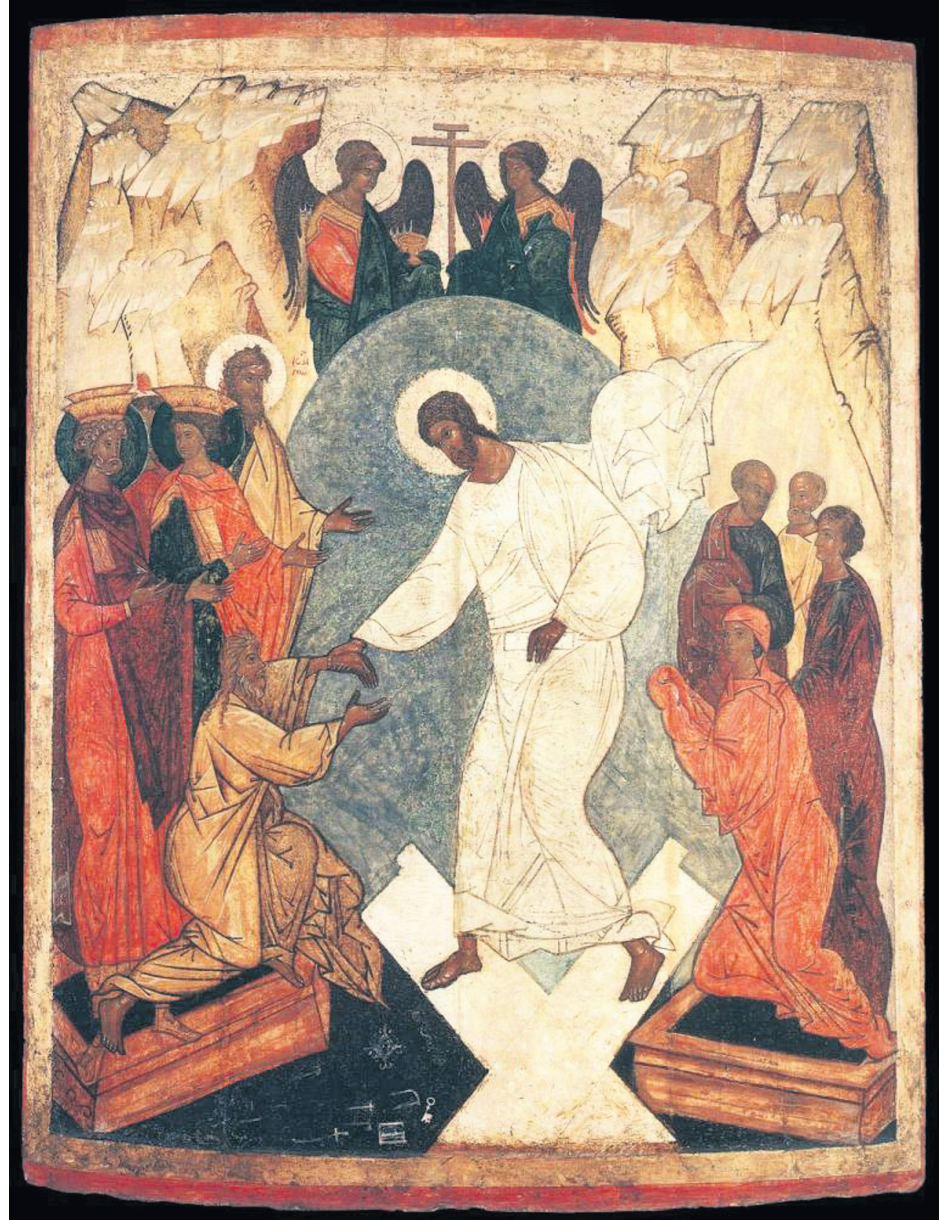
The first people whom Christ pulls out of the prison of death are Adam and Eve, which strikes me as a particularly magnanimous gesture.

It is beautifully explored in a hymn ("It is finished! Blessed Jesus") by William MacLagan:

In the hidden realms of darkness  
Shines a light unseen before,  
When the Lord of dead and living  
Enters at the lowly door.

Lo! in spirit, rich in mercy  
Comes he from the world above,  
Preaching to the souls in prison  
Tidings of his dying love.

The other image is of my parents. It is a photograph that I took of them against the backdrop of the Pacific Ocean. It's dearer to me than anything I have in shelves of books on works of art. They are both well, in seclusion in the Yorkshire village where I grew up. They spent fifty years helping that community: my mother recently drove the project to rebuild the village hall, and, over the years, much village plumbing has been



mended by my father. Now, I'm glad to say, people are getting shopping in for them.

**DURING** the outbreak, each day has been punctuated by the Litany from *Common Worship: Daily Prayer*. It is an outpouring of intercession, which seems right at the moment. Since Easter, the community at my college, Corpus Christi, has been praying compline together, over the internet. I have been struck by a line in the intercessions for Eastertide: "Let us commend the world, in which Christ rose from the dead, to the mercy and protection of God." It could easily be a throwaway line, but it gets at the

heart of Easter: this world is now one where the resurrection has begun in Christ.

From **the Bible**, a line from the Sermon on the Mount has struck home: "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7.21). It serves as a warning against smug religious self-confidence, but I also see in it a promise: when people are putting their lives at risk out of love for their fellow human beings, it is good to know that those who live as Jesus demonstrates will find their place in his Kingdom

*Continued overleaf*

Continued from previous page

BEING separated from one another, we are more aware than ever of the bonds between us: not only between friends, family, and colleagues, but also in the service done each day by people who are not paid a great deal, for work done in the background — by delivery drivers and shop staff, for instance.

The past few weeks have also been the first when I've really felt that the street on which I live is a community. That's in part because of a group I joined to run errands for the housebound, but also because we see one another on our daily exercise, or working in our front gardens. All of this sent me back to John Lancaster's 2012 novel *Capital*, which charts with enormous warmth and sympathy the interwoven lives of the residents on a street in London, with its corner shop.

When it comes to **theological reading**, I won't waste the opportunity to recommend a couple of anthologies of short passages from the two theologians that mean the most to me: *An Augustine Synthesis*, edited by Erich Przywara, and *The Human Wisdom of St Thomas: A breviary of philosophy*, edited by Josef Pieper.



I DON'T watch a great deal of **television**, or many films, but I do have a fondness for series from the United States, such as *The West Wing* or *Six Feet Under*. Other than that, my viewing tends towards opera, or contemporary ballet — but in present circumstances, my recommendation is that we have a good laugh, with *Fawlty Towers*. I have also got into a podcast: *Music Student 101*, from Birmingham, Alabama, which works its way through swaths of music theory, as lively dialogue between two presenters.

A piece of **music** that gets played in all available recordings in the first days of Easter is the *Missa Salisburgensis*, a Mass written for Salzburg Cathedral in the late

17th century, almost certainly by Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber (1644-1704). It has the distinction of being in 53 parts, with two choirs of eight parts each, and a great deal of brass and timpani. I don't know another piece of music which quite matches its spirit of Easter joy and victory.

Otherwise, I am having a Beethoven year, since it includes the 250th anniversary of his birth. I won't be alone in thinking that his 16 string quartets are an unsurpassed achievement. The cycle of recordings coming out at the moment from the Quatuor Ébène is magnificent. I have been trying to finish a book on the theological significance of life elsewhere in the universe. A thought that's been going round in my head is that, whatever there may be anywhere else, it could not diminish the significance of Beethoven's achievement, writing for just four stringed instruments.

*Canon Andrew Davison is Starbridge Lecturer in Theology and Natural Sciences in the University of Cambridge, and Fellow in Theology and Dean of Chapel at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.*

*Next week: Paula Gooder.*

## ‘Wholly into thy will’

**The Revd Michael Counsell, who died in 2015, was the author of *2000 Years of Christian Prayer*, and contributed occasional articles to the *Church Times*. In 2012, he selected a prayer, writing:**

NOT MANY of us could claim to be experts on Reformation history. When I saw the play *A Man for All Seasons* by Robert Bolt, and then the film, I felt convinced that Sir Thomas More was a saint, and Thomas Cromwell, who brought about his execution, a villain.

But now that I have read *Wolf Hall*, by Hilary Mantel, and its sequel *Bring up the Bodies*, I realise that life is not so simple. These novels tell the turbulent tale of Henry VIII's reign from Cromwell's point of view, as though he were telling the story himself. More was a good man, but not without faults; Cromwell, I now see, was unscrupulous in pursuit of what he saw as the well-being of King and country. I look forward to the third book in the trilogy to learn how Cromwell was himself brought to execution.

[The book is now published, of course: *The Mirror and the Light* (4th Estate, £25; *Church Times Bookshop*, £22.50).]

Then I rediscovered this prayer, and gasped at the calmness with which this complicated man faced his end:

O Lord Jesu, who art the only health of all men living, and the everlasting life of them which die in thy faith; I give myself wholly into thy will; being sure the thing cannot perish which is committed unto thy mercy. . . O Lord, into thy hands I commit my soul.

Most people have to face some tough decisions in their life, and, with hindsight, most of us would admit that some of them were the wrong decision, and resulted in hurt to other people which we did not intend. We can learn from Cromwell's example to cast our good intentions, the harm we have caused to others, and our eternal soul on God's mercy. We can be sure that he will forgive, and bring us to a blessed eternity, if we repent and trust in God's love revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

We can never deserve heaven, and if we try to earn it by our merits, we are guilty of the self-centredness that lies at the heart of sin.

So what did Cromwell mean when he



Thomas Cromwell, portrait by Hans Holbein the Younger (1532-33)

said that “the thing cannot perish, which is committed unto thy mercy”? I think he had two things in mind: his good intentions in his life, and the immortal soul that God had given him. . .

He offered his good intentions to God, in the certainty that God could bring good even out of disaster. But, above all, he commended his soul to God's mercy, trusting that divine compassion could overcome even the guilt that he had incurred.

It would do none of us any harm to learn this prayer, and to say it often, so that we may be ready to say it also on our death-beds.