

Opinion **Coronavirus pandemic**

## A year of Covid lessons from a monk's cloistered cell

As we celebrate Easter and Passover, the dark night of the pandemic has been a stern teacher to us all

**LAURENCE FREEMAN**



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**Laurence Freeman** YESTERDAY

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The early monks in my tradition used to say, “stay in your cell and your cell will teach you everything”. This somewhat intimidating advice was intended to stabilise the restless and distracted — and I’m sure it didn’t always work. Yet through the past year’s various lockdowns, that is what I have been doing.

My cell is in Bonnevaux, our international retreat centre in France that I am helping set up. I cannot say I have learnt everything after a year meditating in a cloister. Yet it has taught me some things I had forgotten, and others that are new. I like to hope they hold some value for those who have suffered and felt fearful during the pandemic.

Meditation is often misunderstood and identified only with stress-reduction. For 30 years I have travelled widely, teaching it to those who want to try and build it into their lives as a daily discipline — be they [overtasked chief executives](#), [MBA students](#), children, prisoners or the homeless. It's not an esoteric practice or a monastic privilege but a way of simplicity available to all. Of course, “keeping it simple” is hard, but Covid has been an effective teacher of what that means.

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Perhaps its biggest sense can be seen in the story of the third century monk, St Anthony of the Desert. In a midlife crisis, he withdrew into complete solitude for 20 years. When his friends came to get him out, they expected to find him dead or insane. In fact, he walked towards them in perfect health, “neither too fat nor too thin”, with a glowing complexion and beautiful smile. For the rest of his life, St Anthony devoted himself to comforting the sorrowful, healing the sick and reconciling the divided. The story shows that the good work of meditation, of being in your cell, can generate all kinds of good works.

I have been fortunate to do this in Bonnevaux. It is a beautiful place, set among field and woods — with a TGV train track nearby as a regular reminder of the noisy world. Founded by Benedictine monks in 1119, it functioned as a contemplative centre until the French Revolution, and waited for us to arrive in 2019 and start renovating it.

Then Covid struck, disrupting our plans but also, as often happens, revealing something new. We postponed projects, such as opening a guest house, and identified an urgent responsibility to share what we could through an online programme of retreats and seminars. The [community I helped found](#), the WCCM, happens to share the same birth year as the world wide web. Even so, the scale of the uptake amazed us.

Many who had never been cloistered at home told me of their struggles with depression and anger, or of being lured into the false consolations of escapism, conspiracy groups, Netflix bingeing, pornography or alcohol. I heard young and old express an intense restlessness to “get back to normal”, entwined with deep fears of the future. At the same time, though, many told me of the unexpected benefits of lockdown: more time with loved ones, space to read, write poetry, walk in nature, and to take their interior life more seriously at last.

Covid has clearly shown how crucial a medium of global consciousness the internet can be. But as much as being a channel for business, entertainment or education, and despite its darker sides of deception and fostering hatred, it has a spiritual potential for truth-telling and transformative encounters too.

At Bonnevaux this made us busier than before. Yet we control busy-ness with the daily monastic round taught by St Benedict, and its morning and evening times of prayer. It still amazes me how stillness can change, teach and energise us for good work, especially at bleak times such as the pandemic.

## Are you under 35? Which issues concern you most?

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We want to hear from readers aged between 16 and 35 on what life is like, and which problems need fixing most urgently. Housing? Education? Jobs? Pensions? The environment? Tell us about your experiences via a [short survey](#).

I recall the drive I used to make from London to my mother monastery in Italy. It is a lovely journey but marked by interminable *autostrade* tunnels. Covid reminds me of these tunnels — the sensation of coming in and out of blinding sunlight, with long stretches of no natural light at all. The spiritual term for those long tunnels is a “dark night”.

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Covid is not just a “crisis” but also a “dark night”. That means a dying of the old self, and involves enduring radical uncertainty. Many economists and politicians are prescribing what life should be “after the crisis”. But just as necessary is to understand what it is we are dying to. How we understand what is happening determines how we emerge.

The Christian world is currently celebrating — which means trying to understand better — Easter. At Bonnevaux we have entered the three-day tunnel that begins on Good Friday. That we pass through it with everyone celebrating Passover vastly deepens its meaning. The idea of Easter is for your personal cross (and who has not got one?) to expand beyond personal suffering into humanity's dark night, and to bathe in the transfiguration that dawns on the other side. The event horizon of death cannot be avoided, but need not terrify us. To pass over is also to get through.

The past year has taught me to be cautious about predictions. But perhaps one enduring lesson from Covid is the value of staying more in our cell, of being still and remembering what *being* means, versus nonstop *doing*. It could make all the difference between fear of death, and discovering the authentic hope in resurrection.

*The writer, a Benedictine monk, is director of the [World Community for Christian Meditation](#); his latest book is Good Work*

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