

Looking on *You-tube* for a performance of today's hymn for our website, I discovered that *God of grace and God of glory* is much better known in the United States than it is here – but there they sing it to the tune *Cwm Rhonda (Guide me, O thou great redeemer)*. Investigating, I learnt that author Harry Emerson Fosdick was indeed an American – and that he always wanted his hymn sung to the tune I associate with it, but couldn't find for today: *Regent Square*. Sorry if that's your favourite too! I chose it partly for its link with today's reading from Romans, with Paul's urge to *wake from sleep* and *put on the armour of light* – something we normally reflect on in Advent.

We're told that the human animal possesses two contrasting instinctive responses to danger: *flight* or *fight* – run away from or move towards to engage. Fosdick's hymn moves towards *the facing of this hour*, promoting engagement with its challenges. *The living of these days* could apply to any testing time; but for Fosdick it was the time of the Great Depression. He wrote the hymn in 1930 for the dedication of a new church where he was to serve as pastor. He'd turned down an earlier offer from John D. Rockefeller to be minister of a different, very well-appointed church – I wonder if he considered it *rich in goods but poor in soul*? The new church was in a much more modest area near Harlem: it was characteristic of liberal protestant Fosdick that he shied away from money to engage with the challenges of poverty – something that comes through in his hymn: *gird our lives that they may be armoured with all Christlike graces in the fight to set men free*.

It's been pretty easy to apply a *flight* response to Coronavirus – because that was what most of us were told to do during lockdown: retreat into our homes and avoid contact. If you wanted to *fight* it, unless you were a key-worker, you might have had to have been satisfied by stepping forwards to be a community volunteer; or, less positively, by resisting the imposition of the restrictions on your way of life. For me, one of the ways I flee is to shrink my world: if life is overwhelming, I restrict my attention to a restricted area around me which I feel I can manage. Sometimes this is a pragmatic response: the beginning of the proverbial approach to eating an elephant: one bite at a time. But it comes with the temptation to bury one's head in the sand: ignoring real needs, responsibilities or threats beyond one's self-limited universe. Another time I might think about that in relation to climate change. That's an issue which has vanished from many people's radar; similarly reducing plastic or even Brexit. Coronavirus has legitimately shrunk some people's world to the area of their house and garden; while I'm sure many of us have been relatively unaware of the impact of the virus on those in other walks of life or poorer parts of the world. But now the Government continually urges us to turn from flight from the virus to reengage with life – and the economy. The return to school is a clear priority; I'm not so sure about the campaign to get all those working from home back to the office: we're told we still need to maintain the precautions. It's apt that Fosdick's hymn prays for *courage* coupled with *wisdom*: we don't need the recklessness which sometimes accompanies an instinctive fight response.

The financial impact of Coronavirus has heightened the challenge the Church of England faces in having an infrastructure and model of ministry which is now unsustainable. A flight response here might see the Church retreating from engagement with the wider world – dominated by the demands of trying to maintain our internal life. It might be evidenced by the shrinking of our attention to our own congregation or benefice – when our Christian responsibilities and identity reach far beyond that limited sphere. To respond in that way would, in the words of our hymn, fail both man and God. One of the things which holds us back is fear – fear of losing what we know and love; fear of moving out into the unknown. We've all faced the unknown this year – but we've come through. *From the fears that long have bound us*, prays Fosdick, *free our hearts to faith and praise*. Well, in the words of another hymn, through lockdown the *voice of prayer* has never been silent; and even though we're still prevented from singing in church, *the strain of praise* has not died away.

Thanks be to God.

Martin Greenland