HENEVER I ascend the stairs of the organ loft in Magdalen College Chapel, a wooden board listing the Organists of the College from 1480 reminds me of the small part that I play in a long story. Predecessors witnessed plagues, conflicts, and closures over the centuries (without the help of any technology), and yet the choral foundation endures. The comfort of this doesn’t entirely mitigate the pain of separation from making music as part of the opus Dei, but it does at least provide some much-needed context.

Like many others’, I imagine, my plans for cultural and intellectual stimulation during lockdown regressed from overambitious to decidedly modest, as I found my faculties severely diminished by countless hours of screen time. Having now admitted to myself that Proust will have to wait for another day, I have discovered a newfound love for reading short stories. A bit like deciding what to have for supper, with collections by Italo Calvino, Alice Munro, Saki, Ivan Turgenev, and Eudora Welty, plus several anthologies, picking out something that suits my mood and then settling down for half an hour or so has been enjoyable. That is often the most that I can handle after a day of teaching, marking exam scripts, meetings, and online rehearsals.

The recent anniversary of the death in 2014 of the Revd Dr John Hughes, a much loved colleague and friend, prompted me to dip once more into Graced Life, a collection of John’s writings, edited by Matthew Bullimore and published in 2016. In The Politics of Forgiveness, an essay written in his final year as an undergraduate at Jesus College, Cambridge, where John later became Dean of Chapel, he speaks to challenges faced by all of us as we reflect on our part in historic and ongoing injustices: “The political process of forgiveness, while needing to be reciprocal to be successful, also demands that someone make the risky and costly step of breaking the circle of recrimination and violence in order to get the circle to begin at all. Without such an initiative, the two sides will remain in a state of deadlock, waiting for the other to make the first move.”

Listening to music has taken on a certain poignancy at a time when live music-making has stopped, and musicians, both professional and amateur, have been silenced by the pandemic. Each August, I would normally find myself in Portland, Oregon, celebrating the music of the Renaissance with friends and colleagues in the annual William Byrd Festival — but not this year.

Many of Byrd’s motets speak of the pain and frustration of the recusancy and religious isolation that was the reality of his daily existence. Quomodo cantabimus draws its text from verses 4 to 7 of Psalm No. 17 | 17 JULY 2020 www.churchtimes.co.uk

Continued overleaf
IT IS hard to believe that we have got so far through a crisis without drawing on Charles Dickens. Here, Esther Summerson, in Bleak House, recounts her slow recovery from smallpox, contracted while she nursed her maid Charley:

I LAY ill through several weeks, and the usual tenor of my life became like an old remembrance. But this was not the effect of time so much as of the change in all my habits made by the helplessness and inaction of a sick-room.

Before I had been confined to it many days, everything else seemed to have retired into a remote distance where there was little or no separation between the various stages of my life which had been really divided by years. In falling ill, I seemed to have crossed a dark lake and to have left all my experiences, mingled together by the great distance, on the healthy shore.

While I was very ill, the way in which . . . divisions of time became confused with one another distressed my mind exceedingly. At once a child, an elder girl, and the little woman I had been so happy as, I was not only oppressed by cares and difficulties adapted to each station, but by the great perplexity of endlessly trying to reconcile them. I suppose that few who have not been in such a condition can quite understand what I mean or what painful unrest arose from this source.

For the same reason I am almost afraid to hint at that time in my disorder — it seemed one long night, but I believe there were both nights and days in it — when I laboured up colossal staircases, ever striving to reach the top, and ever turned, as I have seen a worm in a garden path, by some obstruction, and labouring again. I knew perfectly at intervals, and I think vaguely at most times, that I was in my bed; and I talked with Charley, and felt her touch, and knew her very well; yet I would find myself complaining. "Oh, more of these never-ending stairs, Charley — more and more — piled up to the sky, I think!" and labouring on again . . .

Perhaps the less I say of these sick experiences, the less tedious and the more intelligible I shall be. I do not recall them to make others unhappy or because I am now the least unhappy in remembering them. It may be that if we knew more of such strange afflictions we might be the better able to alleviate their intensity. The repose that succeeded, the long delicious sleep, the blissful rest, when in my weakness I was too calm to have any care for myself and could have heard (or so I think now) that I was dying, with no other emotion than with a pitying love for those I left behind — this state can be perhaps more widely understood. . .

I had heard my Ada crying at the door, day and night; I had heard her calling to me that I was cruel and did not love her; I had heard (or so I think now) that I was dying, with no other emotion than with a pitying love for those I left behind — this state can be perhaps more widely understood. . .

By and by my strength began to be restored. Instead of lying, with so strange a calmness, watching what was done for me, as if it were done for some one else whom I was quietly sorry for, I helped it a little, and so on to a little more and much more, until I became useful to myself, and interested, and attached to life again.