

Harrold Macmillan once compared running the economy with driving a car: there is a need for both a break and an accelerator. He had the tension between full employment, driving inflation, and deflation, driving unemployment, in mind. When he spoke of our never having had it so good, in Bedford in July 1957, he qualified this with the following: *What is beginning to worry some of us is 'Is it too good to be true?' or perhaps I should say, 'Is it too good to last?'* Prophetic words. For we enter 2020 with something of this tension still at play. What are we welcoming this year for?

I managed to escape for a wonderful walk, yesterday, which began at dawn with a chance encounter with a little old lady walking her dog and her passing comment, *It will all be over soon* stopped me in my tracks wondering what on earth was going to come next, but this was followed by *and then we'll be back to normal*. That strange mix again of what I initially took for despair *It will all be over soon* and optimism *and then we'll be back to normal*. But this still left me wondering whether the new normal isn't also a cause for despair; a brief period of inflation followed by deflation with no end in sight; of New Year festivities followed by a harsh dose of reality?

Fortunately, I still had most of my walk before me and was able to gradually let go of such fears, stilled by the rhythm of walking in a generally silent and empty landscape – empty that is of any more people, the prime protagonists in all my fears. And nature itself began its restorative powers: a mistle thrush singing here; badger tracks emerging from a wood; woodcock exploding from the undergrowth; a solitary golden plover reminding me of true wilderness to the north – and so on. I was walking myself into a sense of peace, of 'never having it so good'. But would it last? Is it possible to stand aside from the roller coaster of inflation and deflation, of optimism and despair, which otherwise assails us?

Nicholas Lash distinguishes between optimism and despair as 'closed systems', and hope as an 'open system'. The former have an end in view, whether good or bad, and become predictive. The latter is more about relinquishing control of our future and allowing the possibility of God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. It's like going on a long walk with no idea really of what's going to happen next or, better, allowing what's already out there to reveal itself; we still have to be present to it but it's not really under our control. Just like a child in a manger, perhaps: a gift simply waiting to be received. Peace and joy as our default position, then, if only we can let it be.

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