

# We're All (Not) Going On A Summer Holiday (August 2020)

August 2, 2020

**by Rev Paul Graham**

We're in holiday season! This may come as a shock to many who have had to put 2020 on hold for various reasons, mostly related to the pandemic that still dominates our horizon. But it's true; traditionally August is the month when buckets and spades are dusted down, last year's sand is discovered in the recesses of picnic hampers, long queues to the beach are anticipated and the cry of "Are we nearly there yet?" rends the air from many an overheated car.

But not this year. For many families, it's felt like a bit of an extended school holiday that started back in mid-March, punctuated with the pressure of home schooling and an increased sympathy for teaching staff. For others, it's been relentless, as they've veered from panic buying toilet rolls to finding the endless summer days stretching, well, endlessly as the usual round of social engagements are cancelled. For those who mark their year with the regularity of Wimbledon and strawberries, there has at least been a diet of classic matches on TV to accompany the cream. For others, TV has been the only company, a reminder of what the world used to look like all in the dim and distant past, or "February" as historians are calling it.

So, instead of finding that our television schedules are crammed with repeats in anticipation of the autumn launch, or the airwaves full of the sounds of the Proms or Glastonbury, we find that its business as usual. A quick look through the listings shows how many repeats are being shown as filming had to pause earlier in the year. They say, "There's nothing new under the sun" and good old Auntie seems to want to prove the rule (other TV channels are available).

But August (and indeed September for those who like to take their holidays after the school year starts) is going to be quite a bit different this year. There are some who are venturing abroad for a bit of summer sun, in accordance with local guidance and lockdown measures, and there are others who are going to enjoy the rich variety on offer across the British mainland (it seems like the majority of the country will be in Devon and Cornwall if the locals are to be believed). Others are holidaying at home, with the opportunity to discover their locality and their immediate surroundings. Still others are just looking forward to seeing family again in the flesh, as those of us who are getting used to Skype or Zoom (other video conferencing platforms are available) are going to find out if our relatives still have legs.

And, looking forward to September, there is an expectation that the schools will reopen to welcome all children to a full year of learning and formation. Of course, their first challenge will be to find out what has been going on between March and July and how much has been learned. The lockdown will, I'm sure, cast a light on some deep safeguarding issues, where children have been more exposed to problems in the home and the shadows of these situations will extend far into the autumn and beyond.

For this is one of the consequences of this situation. Even as the days lengthened through the first few weeks of the pandemic, doors were shut and families drew back as the school gates clanged closed. Try as they might to maintain contact, there is only so much that school staff can do once the children are no longer seen on a regular basis.

It has been reported that calls to domestic abuse hotlines increased massively from March onwards, with added strain placed on relationships; even strong and stable ones were derailed by the immediacy of furloughing, redundancy, home schooling, empty shelves and a myriad factors that no-one could have predicted.

But it isn't all bleak, though we are mindful that what has been described so far barely scratches the surface of the impact that the lockdown has had on people's lives. We could go on to mention isolation, loneliness, fear, other health worries, other forms of abuse and so much more. But this is not the time nor the place to explore these important issues.

Looking at the flip side of the situation is helpful, just as the image I painted earlier of a day at the seaside shouldn't be remembered for a seagull stealing a chip but for the unmistakable and not unpleasant slightly gritty taste of sand with every mouthful of pasty. Nothing beats that, in my book.

The same is true of this pandemic. There has been a lot that has gone wrong with this situation as the whole world has had to react, and not always well. But there is also so much that has gone right and we might want to hold onto this as we look forward with uncertainty to whatever the rest of the year has in store for us.

For one thing, we have seen the re-emergence of the importance of the community. Many of us made a weekly appointment with our neighbours to applaud or bang a saucepan in support of the NHS (cost to Graham household: one wooden spoon, broken in a spate of over-enthusiastic clanging). Others have joined local community support groups, running errands, shopping and phoning the vulnerable and shielding. Others have done the same thing unofficially for all sorts of people. Yet others have been the grateful recipients of this level of care.

All of this has shown that we can still talk to one another; we have found a common cause to unite us. And I don't mean the virus, though that has been the catalyst for this whole thing. What has united us is a question, or a variation of the same: "How are you?"

We have shown that we care. We care for old Doris down the road, whereas before we might just have ignored her as we got on with our busy lives. We now look out for Stanley and have a chat with him over the garden fence as he continues to watch for anyone unfamiliar trespassing on the street. Instead of being a nuisance and a busybody, they're now counted as ... friends.

Certainly, there are people who I now have saved in our telephone list who I didn't even know existed 6 months ago, let alone realised lived in Clare. The virus may have closed doors for some, but for others it has opened up lines of communication and all based on the biblical principle of "loving our neighbours".

We also pray. For those who we are not able to contact we know that God's Spirit can go where we cannot. We pray that they will know God's grace, peace, love, whatever is needed to get them through the day. We pray that God will send someone who can bear his light into the darkness, that there is hope. And where there is grief, we pray for God's comforting embrace.

What the world will look like at the end of September, when the next article is due for publication, I haven't the faintest clue. However, I hope that we continue to share in the burden of care that God places upon each one of us, for ourselves as well as for others. After all, the greatest commandment reminds us:

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-39)*