

Hope and despair

Genesis 8: 1 -19

John 14: 1 -14.

Hope and despair, two sides of the same coin.

It is so easy to become despondent when we see the way the world is going. Everywhere there seems to be trouble.

We look at countries tearing themselves apart in brutal civil wars, neighbour against neighbour, family against family, brother against brother – and for what?

Syria has destroyed so much of its heritage, the Ukraine is polarising into western thinking areas and those who support Russia.

Boko Haram, an obscure sect of militant Islamism in Africa are decimating villages, raping women, abducting children, - in the name of God – for heaven's sake!

When is it all going to stop?

Christian Aid is taking as its theme this year, fear and trying to relieve it. The whole world is falling into a kind of depression, not necessarily financial, but social, a spiral of destruction.

And we don't have to seek for far flung places with no immediate relevance to us in our first world luxury, to find the same malaise on our own doorsteps.

A fifteen year old murders his teacher.

Within a week, "copycat" incidents are reported from other schools, thankfully before harm could be done.

Our welfare system is in such a mess that people are being referred to food banks to feed their families; the NHS appears to be crumbling at the edges, love, care and concern for the very sick and dying giving way to statistics, funding cuts and sheer waste of resources.

No wonder we feel with Jesus on the cross as he cried out. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" echoing Psalm 22, written so many centuries before.

And it can be personal, too.

According to a report in the Church Times, between eight and twelve percent of the population are suffering from anxiety or depression at any one time.

And the clergy are not immune, either. Apparently 30% of clergy admit to suffering from depression since becoming ordained, and 18 to 25 % of clergy are depressed at any one time.

Christians hate to admit they feel depressed. Aren't we all supposed to be happy, praising God for his blessings and knowing we are eternally safe. Isn't that enough to save us from earthly despair?

Many of us have reasons to be sad and in despair. Life throws some terribly googlies at us, illness, bereavement, unemployment.

But sometimes, out of a clear blue sky, we feel we have lost hope. Life is not worth living. We are ashamed of these feelings and try to hide them, afraid to lose face and seek help.

Think how much more difficult it must be for the clergy, whose congregations look up to them for leadership, for inspiration. How can they let God down so badly?

They don't. We let them down.

It can be our infighting and power positioning and entrenched ideas, unwilling to change even if it causes the death of our church.

So what can be done?

We need to cherish our clergy, pray for them, support them.

Today we read part of the wonderful story of Noah, that ancient flood narrative which predates our Bible and goes back to ancient Mesopotamia. Many civilisations have their own version. And we will remember the story from our earliest years.

Does God suffer from depression?

He was certainly angry.

He was in despair about this glorious world he had created out of love, and which had gone pear – shaped.

It was in such a mess that he threatened to destroy it altogether, and everything in it.

“The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was full of pain.” (NIV).

But then he relented. He appointed Noah, a good man, to be the saviour of the known world.

So Noah built and stocked his ark according to God's command, then set sail in literally uncharted territory. Where we came in at our reading today, the rains have stopped, the floodgates have closed, and the waters are receding. The beginnings of hope.

First a raven is sent out, then the dove goes, but comes back empty handed. A week passes, and off it goes again, bringing back the olive branch. Seven more days, and the dove does not return. The land has dried out and Noah can start normal life again.

What faith, what resilience, what courage, what obedience did Noah show!

In the face of mockery he stood fast and obeyed the will of God. It was not the work of a moment, but a long haul over many months, if not years. You can imagine the taunts he endured, as he built that boat!

We see in Noah's patience the gradual redemption of the world, as the earth, once cleansed of all that made it evil, was gradually restored, little by little.

It was his total dedication to God; his blind faith, that carried him through.

In this story, Noah was the saviour of the ancient world.

Are there parallels to be drawn here between this ancient fable and the life of Christ?

Jesus was totally dedicated to his Father God, he obeyed him in every particular, like Noah, he was in constant communication with him, day and night. He faced mockery, torture and death.

Noah escaped that fate, his task was to replenish the earth, which he did . And God sent a rainbow as a promise that never again would he destroy the earth.

**But then it all went pear shaped again.
So Jesus came.**

Jesus' task was to save the world and its people from their sin. They were not to be destroyed this time.

To fulfil his task, he had to die, he had to enter the tunnel of despair, pain and anguish and give up his very life on a splintery, rough wooden cross. He had to pass through all the feelings and emotions that embody the suffering of people today.

In our second lesson, we read, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me" (NIV); one of the most evocative and comforting passages of scripture, so beautifully written by John.

Jesus said these things to comfort his disciples while he was trying to prepare them for what was to come. He had warned them that they would betray him, run away, desert him when he needed them most. And they did.

But the hope, the good news, that cuts through our tarnished world and our inadequate selves, is, that Christ died for us. He died for our sins, for our despair. He has been there, he has felt it; he has conquered it. He has overcome death, he is with us still. He knows the pain of abandonment, of rejection.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled" one of the "precious and very great promises" of Jesus, as St. Peter puts it in his second letter.

When we are sitting in the midst of misery, this can be a hard thing to grasp.

We are so reluctant, faced with a worry, problem or anxiety to respond to Jesus' call.

He says, in Matthew, "Come to me, all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

A child will run instinctively to an adult when in trouble, but we always think we can and should fight it out in our own strength.

But, being yoked to Jesus, as the strong oxen are yoked together, he will shoulder our burden for us and literally take the weight off our shoulders.

It is difficult to see glimpses of heaven and holiness when we cannot see beyond our own troubles.

It requires a true humility, which is an essential element of faith, to bow our heads and admit our weakness, ask for help, and to accept both the yoke and the divine strength of our divine partner.

“Trust in God, trust also in me.”

When we persevere, and it is a lifetimes’ work, we can come to understand that: “ there is an insoluble mystery, a profound sacredness at the heart of the universe, the heart of love, the heart of God himself, the place where the barriers between heaven and earth thin and fade, and we can emerge into a god -filled, hope - enfolded future”. (David Bryant).

“In my father’s house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”(NRSV).

**Our place is prepared.
Let us wait in hope.**

Pat Ellis