

Christian Exercises

Lent Term, 2018

21st January 2018, Revd Dr Simon Perry, Faith

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Revd Dr Simon Perry

Faith

21st January 2018

Several years ago, I was working through the Greek writings of the first century historian, Flavius Josephus. During the Jewish wars with the Romans in the late 60s, Josephus had served as an officer in the Jewish resistance. The resistance movement was comprised of largely disparate bands with competing interests – and Josephus was seeking to consolidate them into a single force. And in a meeting with one of the leaders, he reasoned with him and said, ‘look, if you’re going to be effective against the Romans you need to abandon your course of action, and place your trust in me.’ But in Greek, Josephus told this chap, ‘Repent and believe in me’. Now – of course, that sounds way too biblical to modern ears to be the kind of thing a military officer would say to recruit a potential ally – ‘Repent and believe in me.’ When I read that, it occurred that 2000 years of church history has sanitized and sanctified these kinds of words into religious words. And when reading the Bible, to read words like ‘repent’ and ‘believe’ as religious words, is to misinterpret them – and potentially to misinterpret much of what Christianity might really be.

So ... this term we are revisiting some Christian Exercises – not some kind of spiritual gymnastics, but the kind of things that Christians ‘do’, practices often described as ‘religious’. And this evening we are looking at the word group surrounding faith / belief / trust / loyalty. Though there are modern strands of philosophy that make a great deal of the distinction, for instance, between faith and trust – when it comes to reading this word as we find it in Scripture you simply cannot pick from a list of dictionary or lexicon entries. For instance, the word Josephus used for belief is a channel – and flowing through that channel are all manner of Indo European concepts that no translation can really unravel. In addition, the English word for belief, comes from Anglo-Saxon – ‘by life’ – in other words, your life as the demonstration of whatever it is that you really value. In this light – technically – it’s not we who get to say what we believe in, but for other people to look at our lives from outside and see how the way we live manifests the stuff we treasure.

So from that perspective, modern attempts to compartmentalize religious meanings for religious words look a bit silly. One example might be the widespread consensus that in the beginning, God made two types of people: People of ‘faith’; and normal people. Evolution has produced Religious people on the one hand, and fully-adjusted humans on the other.

And yet when it comes to concepts like ‘belief’ you realize it’s everywhere in contemporary culture. Credit, for instance, is just the Latin word for belief – and if you carry a credit card, you are thereby saying to your bank precisely what Josephus said to this resistance leader: believe in me! When you hear people begin their sentences with, ‘Trust me...’, then translated into New Testament Greek, they would say ‘believe in me.’ Or... if you climb on a bus that says Addenbrookes on the front, you are committing an act of faith – because you have invested your life trusting that this bus will take you where it promises to take you. And there are people here who have discovered first hand that such faith can sometimes prove to be misplaced – because the bus crashed en route to the hospital!

So, all of this to say that ‘belief, faith, trust, credibility’ – they are not ‘religious’ words or concepts employed only by ‘religious people’. In the New Testament – this evening we look at one passage in particular where the word is used.

A generation before Josephus was fighting the Romans, there was a Centurion – probably a Roman centurion – living in Capernaum, a small town about the size of Grantchester. The centurion had a servant who was terminally ill, so

he used his influence with the local Jewish elders to get Jesus to come and heal him. Capernaum was such a small place, and Jesus had been using the town as a base of operations – so he probably knew who the Centurion was and agreed to go. And as we heard, when Jesus was not far off, the Centurion sent a delegation of ‘friends.’ The second message is simply for Jesus to give the order from a distance, in the knowledge that the servant would thereby be healed.

Now at this point, most interpreters point to this supposed relation between faith and miracles. As though the centurion had switched his brain off for a few minutes, to make himself believe that Jesus could do the impossible. So far as I am aware, faith and miracles never go together like that in the Gospels. Instead, a better word for ‘faith’ in this instance, might be loyalty: The loyalty of the high status Centurion willing to risk his reputation for the sake of his low status servant. Or the loyalty of a foreigner to the God of Israel, being willing to build a synagogue for his fellow citizens. But above all, his loyalty to the God of Israel as it was channelled through the person of Jesus.

There is a profound irony, that while many in Israel would not accept that the God of Israel was active in Jesus – this pagan centurion had shown more loyalty to Israel’s God than any Israelite. That is the relation not between faith and miracles, but between loyalty and liberty.

The context for this incident is that Jesus has been telling his followers that they should love their enemies – and the ultimate enemy of the people of God in the first century was Rome. And yet, straight after Jesus has made this demand of his followers, we read not of a Jewish person loving a Roman enemy, but of a Roman loving his Jewish enemy – showing himself to be more loyal to Jesus than even Jesus had expected. We don’t often read that Jesus was surprised - because he’s supposed to be all-knowing. But Jesus was astonished by this pagan military officer – because he showed faith / belief / trust / credence / loyalty. Not in some weird apolitical religious sense – but in a practical, down-to-earth, gritty sense: by life.

So, the context for the faith of this foreigner then, is not something abstract. He was not a ‘person of faith’ in any religious sense. He was a wealthy, senior military officer, representing the occupying army in a volatile region. Ultimately, it was his care for a beloved individual that revealed his multi-dimensional loyalty.

There was, then, nothing otherworldly about his faith.

There was no attempt to close his eyes and make himself believe in the impossible.

There were no mental acrobatics. Only loyalty to what he knew of Israel’s God.

There was no religious xenophobia, only love for his servant.

There was no act of faith other than that shown by someone who joins an army, or uses a credit card, or takes the bus to Addenbrookes.

The question it leaves us with, is in what exactly we place our trust? In what we deliberately, or unthinkingly, or reluctantly, place our trust.

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Repentance

11th February 2018

This evening, we are looking at what the New Testament means by repentance. But of course, we all know that already, don't we. You're all wretched sinners who do nasty things with every nanosecond of your day. (What I read in the Porters Lodge report is only the tip of the iceberg).

So, the only way you can wipe your moral slate and gain access to a post mortem bliss of an eternal shampoo advert with harps and smug satisfaction, is to repent. Either of this or that particular misdeed, or you need to apologise for your entire life. That's the caricature shared by as many believers as unbelievers, but it's quite a long way from the New Testament.

To begin with, one of the crucial aspects of repentance in the Gospels, concerns your ability to change your mind. And we all know, of course, that open mindedness is a cardinal virtue in secular society – and that anyone can be open-minded... can't they? I can't help feeling there's something a rather glib about open-mindedness as some high-sounding easily doable super-virtue. To our ancestors, the belief that you can just click your fingers and decide to become open-minded would seem monumentally naïve. Surely, it's really easy to change your mind?

And at a superficial level, that is indeed one meaning of the word repentance – in fact it comes from the Greek meaning literally, 'after-thought'. You thought Manchester United were the best, now you think it's Manchester City. You have changed your mind. Simple. Easy. Unless it's something you care about a little more fully than hoofing a bag of wind around a large flat field.

All you really need to do is read the comments section on a Youtube video, or a Guardian article or something equally serious. And how often – in the civilized debates that ensue – do you read, 'Oh, thank you for highlighting my stupidity, and redeeming me from my hitherto ignorant state. I have now changed my mind.'? Several decades before the advent of Youtube, the philosopher Socrates had noticed the same human incapacity for openness. In Plato's famous analogy of the cave – those philosophers who enter the cave to help those who have been ideologically imprisoned within a false worldview – face an impossible task. If the prisoners can get their hands on their would-be liberator, says Plato, they would kill him.

Thinking openly is dangerous, difficult, and nearly impossible work. This is why Plato, almost 2000 years before Montaigne, said that to philosophize is to learn how to die. The near impossibility of changing your mind is something that was also profoundly appreciated by the authors of the New Testament.

That is what was highlighted in our Gospel Reading. A Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins sounds like a bizarrely dated religious rite for those who have failed to adjust to the 21st Century. But let's just consider each element briefly. The first Chaplain of Robinson College was Called David Stacey, and he has written about Prophetic Actions in the Old Testament. Ancient Jewish Prophets would perform symbolic actions that would be played out in history. So for instance, they would shave their heads, smash pots, buy plots of land right next to where an invading army was about to march. And John the Baptist, was a prophet. And Baptism was a brutal, violent prophetic act.

So, when John stands there in the Jordan River, he grabs hold of an individual Israelite – and effectively says, ‘here is what is about to happen to your country’. And he smashes them beneath the water, which symbolises a grave, so that when they come back up – they rise to a new way of being. And this is exactly what happened to Israel – at the centre of the nation’s life and for Jews scattered around the globe – the Temple lay at the heart of their ideology. But a generation later, the Roman Army arrived in Jerusalem – and reduced that Temple into a pile of smouldering debris. Bang when the prevailing Jewish worldview. Israel after the Temple needed a new mindset. And the word for repentance means a mind-set that follows on from a previous mindset, as one ideology is displaced by another.

What was the principle function of the Temple in Jerusalem, before it fell? It was the forgiveness of sins. We don’t have time today to go into that, but whatever else it means – it describes a new age, an era in which Israel was no longer subjected to oppression and humiliation, but could enjoy Yahweh’s blessing.

So when you put all that together: a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, was an invitation to inhabit a new ideology, a new mindset, a new worldview, a new way of identifying your place in the universe. But – it was traumatic, it entailed death, and if you were over committed to your worldview, it wasn’t going to happen. At least not, until the Romans arrived and forced everyone into a new worldview. The New Testament is then concerned with unpacking precisely what it means to abandon one cherished ideology in favour of another.

I suppose you have to be careful when it comes to using words like ideology. I notice Anna Soubry has been doing a lot of that this week – in a way that is perfectly natural. Those to the left of me, are being ideological. Those to the right of me, are being ideological. Here in the sensible, civilized middle ground – we are just acting in accordance what is right and natural and proper.

Ideology is perhaps better understood as the prevailing logic in which your ideas take shape. For many, ideology refers not only to what you think, but to the processes by which your thoughts take shape. You cannot have an idea without an ideology. Or – if I remember Carl Jung properly – people don’t have ideas, ideas have people. In this light, those who claim to be free from all ideology, are those most hopelessly imprisoned by it. Or put differently, ideology only works fully when it is invisible and undetectable to those inside it. And from this perspective – Jesus’s parables are sheer brilliance, because they expose ideologies people didn’t realise they treasured.

People don’t have ideas, ideas have people. Or in Platonic terms, ideas imprison people. Or in scriptural terms, ideas imprison people hopelessly – which is why changing your ideas is a near miraculous event. It’s why Baptism symbolises both death and resurrection. But of course, ideas are not simply events occurring in the head of an individual.

There is a full-blown physicality to the act of baptism, just as there is a physicality to the meal by which Christians remember the acts of Jesus. You could even say that this is a meal which draws attention to what happened when Jesus of Nazareth entered the Cave of Plato. As Socrates predicted, they got their hands on him and killed him. But Christian tradition claims that he walked out of the cave nevertheless, and this is a meal shared by those who claim to have followed him out.

Dr Scott Annett

Forgiveness

25th February 2018

Towards the end of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero, the magician and former Duke of Milan, announces his intention to relinquish his magical abilities. He claims:

[T]he strong-based promontory

Have I made shake, and by the spurs plucked up
The pine and cedar; graves at my command
Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let 'em forth
By my so potent art. But this rough magic
I here abjure, and when I have required
Some heavenly music, which even now I do,
To work mine end upon their senses that
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book.

(V .1.46-57)

Prospero is fully aware of the power of his 'art', which is 'so potent' that he can cause earthquakes, uproot trees and even raise the dead. And yet, for all that, he intends to 'abjure' his 'rough magic' upon completion of one final supernatural intervention.

In Prospero's phrasing there is an echo of an earlier, and ultimately unrepentant, magician. In the final few moments of his time on earth, Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* desperately hopes to avoid damnation:

Ah, Pythagoras' metempsychosis, were that true,
This soul should fly from me, and I be chang'd
Unto some brutish beast! All beasts are happy,
For, when they die,
Their souls are soon dissolv'd in elements;
But mine must live still to be plagu'd in hell.
Curs'd be the parents that engender'd me!
No, Faustus, curse thyself, curse Lucifer

That hath depriv'd thee of the joys of heaven.

Faustus' mind turns at first to the possibility of reincarnation as a means of escape ('This soul should fly from me, and I be chang'd / Unto some brutish beast'), following which he then imagines himself as a 'happy' beast, for (he argues) the 'souls of beasts 'are soon dissolv'd in elements'. He is drawn to the possibility of annihilation, which he deems to be a more attractive prospect than eternal torment.

For Faustus, time is running out. The clock in his study strikes, to which he responds:

O, it strikes, it strikes! Now, body, turn to air,

Or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell!

O soul, be chang'd into little water-drops,

And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found!

My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!

Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while!

Ugly hell, gape not! come not, Lucifer!

I'll burn my books!

Faustus' final, desperate offer to burn his books evokes the fires of the 'ugly hell' to which he is convinced that he will be sent. And it also stands in direct contrast to Prospero's plan to 'drown' his books, which calls to mind baptism, and the possibility of rebirth (as opposed to the 'still life' that awaits Faustus in hell).

Helen Cooper has noticed that Prospero's ability to strike his enemies immobile replicates the actions of 'the first wicked enchanter in the Tragical History of Guy', which is a play of which both Marlowe and Shakespeare would have been aware. Suffice to say, there is little doubt that Prospero's status as a magician would have been profoundly unsettling for Shakespeare's contemporary audience. Moreover, in the cases of both Prospero and Faustus it is a yearning (and overreaching) for knowledge that lies at the heart of their stories. From the beginning of *Dr Faustus* it is apparent that knowledge is to be found in books, and Mephistopheles seems to sate Faustus' desire for knowledge by giving him a book in Act II, Scene 1, to which Faustus replies, 'Thanks Mephistopheles for this sweet book' (II. i. 161). Similarly Prospero tells us in Act I, Scene 2 that he neglected 'worldy ends' to study (I. ii. 89), while Caliban explicitly links Prospero's magical powers to his books in Act III, Scene 2 when he stresses to Stephano and Trinculo the importance of burning them: without his books Prospero is, according to his servant, 'but a sot' (III. ii. 94).

At this point, we might turn our attention to another intellectual, separated from Prospero and Faustus by at least two hundred years, but who is also caught precariously between the prospect of damnation and the possibility of forgiveness, or maybe better put, the possibility of being forgiven. In Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the impoverished student Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov attempts to draw his delusional intellectual theory (that he might become a kind of Napoleon or superman, if only he dares to seize power for himself) into life. His way of achieving this goal involves the premeditated murder of an elderly pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna, followed by her weak and meek-tempered sister, Lizaveta Ivanovna, whose murder was not part of Raskolnikov's original plan but rather a bungled attempt to cover his tracks. The resulting novel traces Raskolnikov's psychological breakdown as his guilt, coupled with the pressure placed on him by the detective Porfiry Petrovich, climaxes in a confession to his only friend, the virtuous prostitute Sonya Marmeladov.

At the beginning of the novel, Raskolnikov's murder becomes possible as a result of his self-imposed isolation: he shuts himself off from all human contact, including his family. His confession, in contrast, takes place as a result of dialogue, a conversation, throughout the course of which Sonya helps Raskolnikov to see, and to speak, more accurately. He protests to Sonya, 'I only killed a louse, Sonya, a useless, vile pernicious louse', to which

Sonya retorts, 'A human being a louse!' (p. 399). This kind of correction is crucial; it is something that Raskolnikov's previous isolation had made impossible. The conversation continues with Raskolnikov suddenly acknowledging his error: "'Of course I know she wasn't a louse,'" he answered with a strange look. "But I am not telling the truth, Sonya," he added. It is a long time since I have told or known the truth ...' (p. 399).

Raskolnikov explains the murder as a kind of thought experiment, an attempt to find out if 'I was a louse like everybody else or a man, whether I was capable of stepping over the barriers or not' (p. 402). Sonya is repulsed by this attempt to draw abstract theory into life without care for the consequences of other human beings. Indeed, she fears that Raskolnikov has condemned himself ('You will have ceased to be a human being'), and she urgently commands him to "'Go at once":

Go at once, this very minute, stand at the cross-roads, bow down, first kiss the earth which you have defiled, and then bow down to all the world and say to all men aloud, 'I am a murderer!' Then God will send you life again.

(p. 403)

Clearly this instruction involves confession of guilt, but such confession is no private prayer in the ear of God. Rather, Sonya insists that Raskolnikov must place himself before 'all the world', must reveal his true self 'to all men' by proclaiming, aloud, "'I am a murderer!'" and that only then will God send him life again. He must place himself in all of his vulnerability before a community; he must humble himself, and in doing so he must reveal precisely what he has done, and perhaps more challengingly, who he is.

Turning back to Faustus, in the final moments of his life, he imagines his soul transformed into 'little water-drops', which at first might remind us of the drowning of Prospero's book:

However, unlike Raskolnikov, and ultimately unlike Prospero, Faustus' desire to be 'chang'd into little water-drops' is a strategy to avoid taking responsibility for his actions. His line, 'My God, my God, look not so fierce on me', is a travesty of Christ's final words on the Cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27: 46). In an echo (and inversion) of the moment when Christ assumed full responsibility for humanity's sin, Faustus dreams of being dissolved amidst the immensity of the ocean, 'ne'er to be found'. In contrast to Christ's extraordinary humility, Faustus' pride is so great that he would prefer his individual identity to be annihilated than to experience the consequences of his own, freely chosen actions.

O soul, be chang'd into little water-drops,

And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found!

My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!

Unlike Christ, who momentarily points to the apparent absence (or distance) of God, Faustus laments God's proximity, His closeness and His fierceness. A few lines earlier, Faustus had thought of repentance:

The devil will come, and Faustus must be damn'd.

O, I'll leap up to my God!--Who pulls me down?--

See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!

One drop would save my soul, half a drop: ah, my Christ!--

Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ!

Yet will I call on him: O, spare me, Lucifer!--

Where is it now? tis gone: and see, where God

Stretcheth out his arm, and bends his ireful brows!

Mountains and hills, come, come, and fall on me,

And hide me from the heavy wrath of God!

'Faustus must be damn'd'. One way of hearing these lines, perhaps even the primary way, would be to say that Faustus has gone too far, that forgiveness is no longer possible for him. And this would pose some serious theological problems. But another way of hearing the lines would be to suggest that Faustus has decided that he 'must be damn'd'. In other words, Faustus is unwilling (or unable) to imagine a greater power capable of such forgiveness. The God that he imagines looking at him is in fact a creation of his own imagination; he is 'pulled down' by his own inability to place judgment in the hands of others, which I suppose is another way of saying that he actually condemns (or damns) himself. Faustus is in turmoil: 'Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ!' His attention flickers between Christ and Lucifer as he experiences the conflicting impulses to, on the one hand, place himself at the mercy of God's forgiveness, and on the other hand, to retain his own sense of self. He wants, in short, to 'ascend to heaven' as the person that he is, rather than repenting, which must by necessity involve breaking and remaking himself anew. In contrast to both Prospero and Raskolnikov, Faustus refuses to be born again.

Stephen Orgel has argued that Prospero's 'great scheme is not to produce illusions and good weather' but to 'bring about reconciliation' (1987: 60). In this respect, like Faustus who wastes the opportunities granted to him by Mephistopheles on adolescent pranks, Prospero's magic is ultimately unsuccessful; Prospero's magic might be thought to act as a metaphor for his desire to control the world around him, and in these terms his failure is most apparent in the Iago-like silence of his younger brother (and usurper) Antonio at the end of the play, which also calls into question Ariel's earlier description of Antonio's repentance. And yet Prospero's failure is not at all the failure of the play, for the conclusion of *The Tempest* may well involve a necessary acknowledgement of the limitations of Prospero's magic; Prospero cannot (as Orgel suggests) 'bring about reconciliation', because he cannot ultimately control his brother's feelings and sense of self. All that he can do is take responsibility for his own actions, forgive his brother, and place himself back within a community. He must, in a strange way, choose to end his own exile.

And this is precisely what we see in the final lines of the play. With reference to the sin's of Caliban, Prospero admits his share of the blame, 'This thing of darkness / I acknowledge mine' (V.1.275-6). Moreover, having released Ariel ('Be free, and fare thou well'), he steps forwards in the epilogue to plead for his own freedom:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown, And what strength I have's mine own, Which is most faint. Now 'tis true
I must be here confined by you,
Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
Since I have my dukedom got
And pardoned the deceiver, dwell
In this bare island by your spell;
But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands.

In addressing the audience, Prospero merges the fictional and the real, admitting the audience into the play and placing responsibility for the happy ending in their appreciative (and prayerful) hands. He renders himself vulnerable and places himself before the scrutiny of others. In direct opposition to Faustus, he allows himself to be seen. And in being seen, he becomes both responsible and responsive, which in turn allows for the possibility of forgiveness, and change.

And yet, even in Prospero's final plea there is a subtle Faustian reluctance to abandon magic. He admits, 'Now I want / Spirits to enforce, art to enchant' and his verb ('want') suggests both a lack and a desire, so that even in the final moments of the play the pull of 'art' (and identity, or maybe better - ego) can be felt. The possibility of forgiveness may be before Prospero, as it may be before Raskolnikov at the conclusion of Crime and Punishment, but that doesn't mean that he is happy about it, or that the abjuration of magic is quite as final, or complete, as he had suggested it would be. Neither Shakespeare nor Dostoevsky suggest that forgiveness is easy. And nor do they suggest that it is quick. To borrow the final lines from Crime and Punishment, it is 'the beginning of a new story, the story of the gradual renewal of a man, of his gradual regenerations, of his slow progress from one world to another'.

Hope

Professor Morna Hooker

March 4th 2018

When the chaplain offered me 'hope', I felt that I had drawn the short straw. What, I wondered, is hope? We all know, of course, that hope belongs to the famous triad – faith, hope and love – and I'd have been very happy to talk about either faith or love, but so, apparently was he, for you will notice that the chaplain is talking about both those 'virtues' this term.

So I was left with hope – and left to puzzle out what it might mean. Web-sites assure me that it is not the same as optimism, but the definitions they give of the two sound remarkably similar. Optimism looks on the bright side of life.

Is my glass half-full or half-empty? Those of you who say 'half-full' are – like Mr Micawber – hopeful that something good will happen. And if, as Alexander Pope put it, 'hope springs eternal', those who say 'half-full' should be in the majority. Those on the other hand who say 'half-empty' are apparently fearful that things will turn out badly. But I suspect that the answer you give is largely a matter of personality, of attitude, and that the only foundation for our 'hope' or 'fear' lies in our optimism or pessimism.

The word 'hope' seems to be used often simply to express what we would like to be the case. 'I hope it will be fine tomorrow for our picnic,' we might say – but have we any basis for that hope? Have we consulted the weather forecast? – or are we simply expressing a wish? I open my computer and read 'I hope this e-mail finds you well'. If I don't know the sender, he or she probably means 'I want you to do something, and hope you feel up to agreeing to my request,' and if I do know them, they probably mean 'I haven't heard from you from ages, and hope you're still alive'. I am amazed to find how often I (and others too!) use the words 'I hope that' in everyday conversation. Does it mean simply 'this is what I would like to be the case'? Or is there more to it than that?

'Hope' figures in a surprising number of sayings. Centuries before Christ, Greek philosophers declared that 'While there's life, there's hope'. We therefore 'hope against hope' for something unlikely to take place. But when we lose hope we say there 'isn't a hope in hell' of something happening – which is hardly surprising, since Dante tells us that the inscription on the gateway to hell reads: 'Abandon hope, all you who enter here'.

A Victorian picture entitled 'Hope' seemed to offer a way forward, but proved even more baffling. Many of you will never have seen G. F. Watts' picture entitled 'Hope', but those of you whose memories extend back into the twentieth century will probably be familiar with it, for at one time it was very popular indeed. Watts himself seems to have been pleased with it, for he painted several versions, in one of which a faint star can be seen above the blind-folded figure. Is this meant to be the source of hope? If so, of course, she cannot see it. Nor is she likely to hear much, for all but one of the strings on her lyre are broken.

Watts himself said of his paintings that they were 'symbolical', but that 'their symbolism [was] . . . more suggestive than worked out in detail'; his purpose, he wrote, was 'to make people think'. He's certainly done that! Most have been puzzled, and many would agree with G.K. Chesterton when he said that Watts might more accurately have called his painting 'Despair'. But perhaps it was because he had himself known despair that he depicts hope as a woman who appears to have lost everything, and yet sits astride the world, plucking melody from the one string left on her lyre? Watts appears to be trying to suggest that nothing can destroy real hope. Blind, and in rags, the woman is nevertheless pictured 'on top of the world' and straining to hear the music she knows is there. She seems to demonstrate what the philosopher Ernst Bloch described as 'disconcerted hope': a hope that is confused, disturbing, perplexing. It's no wonder that I am left wondering what the source of her hope can be. Is it simply stubborn optimism? Or is there more to it than that?

Well, the chaplain announced last week that I would be attempting to expound a biblical passage, so clearly he expects me to find the answer there. In fact, I've chosen two passages. The first is from the prophet Hosea (2: 2-6, 14-17) who, like Watts, believed in using symbolism. But his symbolism is expressed in words – firstly, he uses the image of a husband who continues to love his adulterous wife to symbolize the love of God for his faithless people Israel.

God is willing to forgive her, and as a sign of this he will rename a valley which had been the way by which he had brought Israel into the Promised Land.

The valley once known as 'the Valley of Trouble' – because it had been the scene of sin and punishment – would henceforth be called 'the Door of Hope'.

So what is the basis for this hope? It is simply the promise of a God who has proved himself to be loving and faithful. In spite of Israel's sin – which had previously brought punishment – he is prepared to begin again, to re-enact the Exodus story, and to restore the nation's prosperity. This hope is founded on the conviction that God is a God of grace, and that the purpose he has for his people will be fulfilled.

It's no accident that the first Hebrew settlement in modern times in Palestine was established in a place they called Petach Tiqvah – 'Door of Hope'. It was a new beginning, an opening to something new – the door to the land which the Jews believed God had given them, all those centuries before. Not surprisingly, the Israeli National Anthem is named Ha-tiqvah, 'The Hope':

'Our hope is not yet lost: it is two thousand years old –

To be a free people in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem'.

Whatever view we take of Israeli politics today, it is important to recognize why they maintain this hope: it is because they believe that God called them to be his people, and that he is faithful to his promises. In the words of the anthem sung by the choir earlier, God had been their 'help in ages past', and so was their 'hope for years to come'. It's a conviction expressed again and again in the Hebrew prophets, who bemoan the destruction that has come upon the people, and who yet obstinately continue to believe that God will again act to save them, and

stubbornly, down the centuries, in spite of the disasters they have endured, the Jews have clung to this hope. And, of course, this hope is not simply an attitude of mind: it demands action. John Polkinghorne was surely right when he wrote that 'Hope is much more than a mood. It involves a commitment to action . . . What we hope for should be what we are prepared to work for and to bring about as far as that power lies in us.' I begin to understand the saying of the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard; 'Hope is passion for what is possible'. A purpose – a goal – and a passion to achieve it.

In our reading from Romans (5:1-5; 8:18-25), Paul reminds his readers of the hope they now have, as a result of what God has done for them through Christ. It is nothing less than a hope of sharing divine glory – and in case they think he's getting carried away, he assures them that this hope is no fantasy. He goes on to explain that this hope will transform not only them but all creation, since it will reverse the results of the Fall. By its very nature, hope cannot be seen, but it is nevertheless certain, since it is based on what God has done. Hope, it has been said, unlike optimism, not only has a goal, but sees a pathway to reach it. But the goal described in Romans is very different from that envisaged by Hosea. No longer is it the possession of the land by one nation, and the exclusion of all others – it is a world-wide vision which includes all nations. For Paul, the goal is nothing less than the transformation of the world – in other words, making it what God intended it to be – and the path to that goal is through the transformation of men and women into God's own image, so that they reflect his love and concern for others.

This is clearly a long way from my expressing a hope that it will be a fine day tomorrow. There's not much I can do about bringing about good weather, and if there's a thunder-storm – or a blizzard – my hopes will be dashed. The hope described by Paul is presented as something which demands my co-operation. Christian hope is not a matter of waiting for God to wave a wand and make us glorious. If the hope is to be achieved, it will be through us. For the Christian, then, hope is a matter of allowing God to work through us. There is a goal, and we are invited to assist in realizing it. Is this why the chaplain couldn't decide whether to call this term's series of talks 'Religious virtues' or 'Christian Exercises'? Hope is not just handed out to us – we have to work for it.

It was Augustine who said: 'Hope has two beautiful daughters, Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are'. Augustine was a theologian, and he knew that theology is not only about understanding the world; it is about mending the world.

Like the hope offered by Hosea to Israel, Christian hope rests on a conviction that God has already demonstrated his grace to us, and will not abandon us, whatever may happen to us. For Paul, this hope is not a hope that God will save those who trust him from suffering, but that they will find him with them in their suffering. 'Hope', wrote Desmond Tutu, is being able to see that there is light, in spite of all the darkness'. Perhaps Watts got it right after all, and the woman in his picture is aware of the light, in spite of her blindness, aware of the music, in spite of her broken lyre. Beneath it all, she clings to the conviction that what she cannot see or hear is nevertheless there. False optimism or authentic hope? The former will get us nowhere. The latter invites us to make it a reality.

Love

Rev Dr Simon Perry

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Jesus set out for Jerusalem, knowing full well that he would be marching straight to his death. And the standard Christian interpretation of this, is something along the lines of – yes, he wanted to save humanity from the eternal damnation every individual deserves, so he entered Jerusalem, and died to pay the penalty that a wrathful God had imposed upon an otherwise irredeemable humanity. Good news eh – Jesus loved you so much he died on your behalf, to ensure that you have access to eternal bliss. There is, however, a more biblical interpretation of this sequence of events.

My first boss in the Air Force was a senior officer who used to call me ‘Perrers’, who had never learned to smile, and whose entire persona was summarized in the poster that hung from his office door that read:

‘Life’s a bitch, and then you die, and then someone else gets all your stuff.’ Now that poster was far more consistent with the Biblical narrative of Jesus’s love-driven journey to the cross.

Because if you read Scripture as a whole, it is consistent with an honest engagement with the world as it really is. That the universe, the world, and the daily life of human beings is a violent, tragic, cosmic litany of disaster after disaster. Horrible stuff happens to people, all the time: death is everywhere and inescapable, life is unbearably fragile and intolerably short and human beings have an innate capacity to make things worse for one another in the quest to make things better for themselves. Life’s a bitch, and then you die, and then someone else gets all your stuff. The real world can be cruel, and barbaric, and viscous, and will crush you if you let it.

There’s nothing necessarily gloomy or nihilist about this... and if you don’t think the world is a horrible place, it’s probably because – for whatever reason – you have yet to experience it properly: maybe because of a culture of trying to protect young people from the world instead of prepare them for it, maybe because of luck, or privilege, of denial, of distraction – but sooner or later, the real world as it is – in all its cold and unsympathetic fury, will impose itself on you. The world is brutish, and violent and cold. And the only thing standing between you and the abyss is something called civilization.

Civilization is the system that enables humanity to salvage some kind of order from the chaos of the universe. It is the basic narrative of the book of Genesis, the creation accounts which show a means by which humans learn to co-exist in the midst of infinite and eternal chaos and meaninglessness. The Old Testament as a whole narrates the story of a particular people group, with a particular form of civilization which enables them to embody a particular way of being that values human life without shrinking from what the world really is. But by the first century, things were not looking great for this particular civilization.

The Jewish people had become an oppressed minority, with no influence, intoxicated now by the sheer power, ideology and culture of the world’s dominant civilization: the Roman Empire.

The Jewish worldview was in danger of being engulfed, losing its distinctiveness, its identity, and its unique means of calling forth order from chaos.

Jesus had spent recent months, reinvigorating the Jewish people groups of Palestinian territories. He had reawakened their tradition of a living and vibrant scripture – that placed radical, political love at the centre of their civilization.

A love that generated a civilization in which the least is valued no less than the greatest.

A love that manifested itself radical, self-giving love for the other.

A love that sought the wellbeing of others, regardless of the social cost, or the emotional cost, or the financial cost.

A love that could be weaponised, disarming oppressors and bullies and cyber trolls without recourse to physical or emotional or verbal violence.

A love that reached into the chaos buried in depths of the human psyche to establish an order of infinitely greater magnitude than self-interest can hope to glimpse.

A love that unlocks unknown dimensions of the self, only by abandoning self-interest.

A love that generates a fully human civilization.

A love that Jesus had taught, and embodied, and that would not halt at the gates of human chaos. That is the kind of love Jesus sought to generate, the kind of society he sought to establish, the kind of civilization he sought to create – when he marched into Jerusalem.

Knowing that he was marching to his own fate, fully aware that life's a bitch, and then you die, and then someone else gets all your stuff.

But Jesus didn't have any stuff.

And death is no defence against a love that generates civilization.

And life is a bitch, but maybe that's not all it is.