



despair: sometimes a springboard

Despair is sometimes judged in Christian terms to be one of the most serious sins. I have always thought it one of the sanest reactions. And that appears to be true for the writer of the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes. Of the human experience, the writer – called *The Teacher* – notes that “...all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.” [Ecc 2.23]

This is not to say that despair is a good state – it is a dangerous one, not to be lingered in. But with danger comes a particular form of possibility. For those of us driven to it at times, take heart. Take heart because despair is as much the *language of the heart* as is love. To know only one without the other is to try to get by with a limited vocabulary. And we are not called to mumble our way through the adventure of life.

It is apparent that we are hearing more voices, here in the West and beyond, express the spirit of Ecclesiastes. There seem to be more people pointing to the ‘alleged’ sanity of our world and saying *but this is insanity*. Like *The Teacher* they have seen that much of human effort and rhetoric is to pointless (even dangerous) ends – ‘vexations, vanities and the chasing after the wind’ as the writer of Ecclesiastes says [cf Ecc 1.14].

Now, this could be hugely liberating, don’t you think? It requires only the right critical mass of onlookers to observe that the Emperor is without any clothes for common misapprehensions or even lies to be unmasked. Let us hope.

I know you are generous and you don’t mind occasional repetition by your preachers – so here we go. You are not called to be *religious* but to follow Christ. This is an adventure requiring many things, not least the slaying of the infatuations many of us have with the illusions of the world. In other words, part of the human duty under God is to be counter-cultural, to be subversive, to embarrass the Emperor by pointing out that he is naked - as well as quickly helping him cover his embarrassment and find new and better ways of dealing with his imperial insecurities.

It requires us to be brave and take risks; to make comparisons not with the Jones’ but with a far wider spectrum of humanity; to cultivate a sense of not taking ourselves seriously *but with the paradoxical injunction* to take ourselves very seriously – as unique, created women and men whose lives have a purpose.

It requires us to live as though this day were our last; to seek to be absurdly generous in all manner of things; to be open always to new discoveries; to be a steward of the mysteries of God; to be the leaven in the lump, God’s square peg in the world’s round hole.

It requires an understanding of *prayer* that has forms without number and may even (occasionally) require words. It requires that mix of humility and confidence which allows us to put our inevitable self-centredness in its proper place *and yet* grasp that each of us is God’s special agent (*you know, I think, the words of St Teresa: “Christ has no body now on earth but ours; No hands but ours; No feet but ours”*).

The world is full of insanities, and a sure sign of the Spirit at work in our lives is when we slowly cease to identify, unthinkingly, with all its affairs and rules and rhythms. And so it is that more people are growing uneasy about the world's dogmas on what constitutes the *good life*. Endless economic expansion is probably costing us the planet; it may also be costing us our souls. In past centuries consumption used to be a disease of the lungs; now it is a disease of the mind and the credit card.

One way of viewing our short lives is as a process of awakening. What our adventures, successes, mistakes, joys and griefs can teach us are those things *that really count*. Those things *which matter*. This steady process, the result of seeing more clearly, can lead us out of despair and beyond collective insanity.

Not all despair leads to death though some of course does (literally and symbolically). Despair can be the hammer that splits open the heart, not so that it breaks and dies but that it opens and breathes. Where and when this happens, the despair of which Ecclesiastes speaks leads us to embrace ourselves and the world *in a new way*.

If that is not an experience of resurrection it would be hard to know what is. Resurrection is not about happiness but about once being dead and now being alive; about once being in a stupor and now being alert; once being weighed down and now experiencing hope; once thinking that what we need is a saviour (someone to get us out of this mess) and now realising, with Teresa of Avila, that we have to take responsibility ourselves.

Paul's letter to the Colossians relates to this. He is talking about the amphibious nature of the Christian – having a foot on the earth and a foot in heaven: able to breath in both environments. *“Set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on the earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”*

Now, some hear these words and dismiss them as fantasy or impractical. That's a shame. They are not. But they involve some cost, and they certainly involve a change of gear. Above all, they require not some kind of spiritual departure from grim reality but to a new kind of engagement *with it*.

Paul here is practical (he often is) about some of the consequential steps, and he does not mess with oblique perambulations. Nothing about *‘perhaps we should consider working towards a point where it may be possible to (dot, dot, dot)’*. No. He says this: *Put to death* those things that get in the way – impurity, greed, the desire to do harm. *Get rid* of anger, malice, slander and abusive language. *Don't lie to one another*. Paul may not be the best comforter when in despair, but he's good at mapping out some of the practical steps.

And in today's reading he finishes with a wonderfully intimate metaphor and a statement of our radical equality before God: he says we have *clothed ourselves with a new self* (with Christ – we *wear* Christ) and that *there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free: but Christ is all and in all*.



All this is about transformation, concerned with change and how we grow into what Paul elsewhere calls the *likeness of God*. It's more than a convenient alliteration to link transformation with *transfiguration*. Both are concerned with change.

On Tuesday (6 August) the church will celebrate the Feast of *The Transfiguration* – it comes from the Gospel story of when Christ's appearance was transfigured in a blaze of light. On the same day there is another anniversary to be mindful of: the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on 6 August 1945.

Every year I am struck by the clumsy and frightening concurrence of that bomb being dropped on the Feast of the Transfiguration.

In one story we hear of Christ glowing with an unearthly light of great intensity which had about it the unquestionable character of God. In another of the light of an explosion, the equivalent of 12 thousand tons of TNT, which brought destruction on a scale never before seen.

In the one story, the witnesses were irradiated by the power and love of God, and brought more fully to life; in the other they were irradiated by atomic energy, and were either vaporised on the spot or given unspeakable illnesses and lingering deaths. We can only imagine with what despair the author of Ecclesiastes might comment on this terrifyingly defining moment of recent human history.

As sane people in a seemingly insane world, I ask you to make time this Tuesday to contemplate the chilling coincidence of the Feast of the Transfiguration and the bombing of Hiroshima.

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The Book of Ecclesiastes talks about despair. Paul talks about the mystery of our having died and of our lives 'being hidden with Christ in God' – a story of hope. History isn't what other people do, it's what we do. Faith isn't only what saints' practise, it's what we practice.

Teresa tells us that our hands, our feet, *our lives* are the ones that do God's business in today's world.

And Luke, to whom goes the final word, suggests we ought not to delay in making that history, practising that faith and making that impact. He recounts Jesus' parabolic warning against the laying up of treasures on earth and that attitude which makes merry with and plays host to some of the illusions of the world, and ends with this: *You fool. This very night your life will be required of you.*

Well, that would indeed be an appropriate final word. But only if it acts as a springboard to that kind of lived-out, active faith to which St Teresa and others point. Hiroshima serves to show - as do so many other examples which include the almost-certainly human-induced climate change, fake news, inflationary rhetoric - our capacity for doing harm and collective insanity, as a way of making the link between ourselves and the world, and to start to shift us from an easy "*it's not me, guv*" detachment to a growing sense of responsibility – that responsibility which flows gloriously from our lives being 'hidden with God in Christ' and our being 'clothed with a new self'.

Despair, hope, action, transformation. Of course we don't always manage it. But sometimes we do.