

I am Not Optimistic ...

I am very conscious that my title is a risky one. So thank-you for reading on when your inclination might be to avoid this altogether. For whether you anticipate from it that I have a gloomy side to my character or am going to deliver a pessimistic take on current events it would be easy to conclude that you don't want to go there. Certainly most of us are wary of those with a pessimistic disposition, particularly in the sort of times we are living in. We fear being sucked down into the gloom of a character like Winnie the Pooh's Eeyore: "Good morning, Pooh Bear," said Eeyore gloomily. "If it is a good morning," he said. "Which I doubt," said he. "Why, what's the matter?" "Nothing, Pooh Bear, nothing. We can't all, and some of us don't. That's all there is to it." "Can't all what?" said Pooh, rubbing his nose. "Gaiety. Song-and-dance. Here we go round the mulberry bush." Perhaps we want a bit of song and dance. Something to cheer our spirits. At a political level we are drawn to populists who are close cousins to optimists who will inspire us with a vision of being great or successful again. But maybe there we are alerted also to the dangers of optimism. We need people too who will keep us truthful and honest and above all real.

So yes there probably is a potentially pessimistic streak to my character - I can fear the worst happening in certain situations. On the whole though I prefer to think of it as being real, of confronting the dark side of any situation because I believe that the truth is kind, and it will ultimately set us free. However that is not the main reason why I've chosen the title I have - I'm not optimistic. I'm not optimistic because as a person of faith I think there is something better on offer which is neither simply optimistic or pessimistic. It is called hope.

The difference between hope and optimism is quite subtle and they can be connected certainly in the way we use language. We can talk of being hopeful when we can see things working out and have evidence that the challenges we are facing will be overcome. That evidence might be particular concrete things that we see happening, or it might be a general confidence in human ability to sort things, to find solutions. An optimist is more likely to notice such things and believe that they will happen. So in our current situation we might focus on specifics like the discovery of a vaccine or the successful management of the virus to be hopeful that life is going to get easier again at some point in the future. Present well being is sustained by that vision and we live within that bubble of optimism when we can see the thing that we are struggling with overcome and transcended. We will get back to normal, we will experience that which gives us pleasure and satisfaction and peace.

There is nothing wrong with that, and it is good to celebrate and draw strength from what is humanly possible. It is though about what is humanly possible, and here I believe is where we draw the distinction between optimism and hope, at least hope in the way people of faith understand it. What we believe to be humanly possible will of course be shaped by the experience and expectations of our time and may rise and fall according to different cultures and histories. But whatever it contains for us, it can always work both ways – delivering and disappointing, leading us into wonderful new places, and letting us down when we are most vulnerable. Trusting in what is humanly possible will always contain ambiguity for humans are wonderful and flawed at the same time.

Hope takes us further than what is just humanly possible. It is centred in what God makes possible. And as such it is not just about the future but the now, waiting patiently as the apostle Paul tells the Romans, knowing “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” Henri Nouwen puts it like this:

“Optimism and hope are radically different attitudes. Optimism is the expectation that things – the weather, human relationships, the economy, the political situation, and so on – will get better. Hope is the trust that God will fulfil God’s purposes to us in a way that leads us to true freedom. The optimist speaks about concrete changes in the future. The person of hope lives in the moment, with the knowledge and trust that all of life is in good hands.”

To trust not just in what is humanly possible but in what God makes possible could be heard as being passive, leaving it all to God, waiting for something to happen. Real hope though is quite the opposite – it frees us into wise and purposeful action that is grounded in reality. I think of Jeremiah whose very name in popular imagination has become a byword for a gloomy and doom laden prophet. The leaders of his day so didn’t like having him around and hearing his message that they locked him away even at one point putting him in a muddy cistern. But actually Jeremiah was a real prophet of hope. He did not spare anyone from his ruthless exposure of the present, but he also pointed them beyond it to renewal and restoration.

There was one time when things were looking especially grim – for the nation that was under siege from the armies of the king of Babylon and for him personally as he was imprisoned under guard in the royal palace of Judah. The king is remonstrating with him for his message that Jerusalem and its king were going to fall into the hands of the Babylonians – “if you fight against them, you will not succeed” he was saying. The city would be destroyed and its people scattered into exile. Then an extraordinary thing happens. A cousin comes to Jeremiah inviting him to buy a field because as the nearest relative it is his right and duty to do so. It was hardly a good moment to be buying land

in a place that was about to be overrun. Yet Jeremiah senses that this is what God wants – not just as a family duty but as a prophetic sign. “For this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says: houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.”

You can read the whole story in Jeremiah 32. It is striking for its extraordinary combination of judgement and hope, a depiction of the ‘sword, famine and plague’ that would devastate the people and their city but also the everlasting covenant with them by which God promises never to stop doing good to them. We are lifted far beyond mere human optimism or pessimism into this realm of hope founded completely on the character of God. Because of it though this dark and doom laden prophet is moved to buy a field. Hope is not passive – but leads to faith filled action.

As Christians we are gospel people – and gospel means good news. The core of our faith is encouraging and hopeful. However that always has to be much more than positive thinking, a denial of difficulty. My experience is that faith is often very painful and joyful at the same time. Painful because reality is often worse than we have owned or been prepared to admit. Joyful because God is present in that reality sharing our sufferings, and transforming them by his loving presence and purposes. The good news is not that human beings can get everything sorted. It is that God is still at work even when they don’t.

So that’s why I’m not an optimistic. But on my good days I am hopeful. And in the times that we are living in I sense God teaching me more about the difference.

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