



Don't Worry, Be Happy

For some reason, I am often asked whether I am an optimist or a pessimist. I think perhaps it's because some people have a view that ministers of religion are naturally "optimistic" types who, because they believe in the presence and work of God in creation, also believe that "everything will work out for the best". I suspect for at least some of the people who ask me this question - and who assume that, on the basis of my religious belief, I will say that I am an optimist - it's really just a preface to asking me why, if I believe in God and God's providence, do bad things happen to good people, or why do some evil people get away with their evil? How can such realities be the basis for optimism, never mind belief in God?

Unfortunately for such people, I usually respond by saying that I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Indeed, I take the view that both optimism and pessimism are closed states of mind that proceed from unsustainable assumptions about the fundamental nature of reality. I believe that the only truly honest way of living is to not only be open to, but to actively embrace the fundamentally ambiguous nature of existence. For within the openness of that ambiguity and the potential for tragedy and sorrow it contains there also lies the prospect for possibility and hope. Human beings are not puppets dancing on the strings of fate or divine whim; and although we are often helpless before the turns of circumstance or coincidence, so we also have capacity and power within the spaces that changing times and emerging situations provide us.

in short, I believe that human existence combines both helplessness and agency all at the same time. The two co-exist together; and the necessary tension of this co-existence is that drama we call "life".

It's a bit like the scientific model for the structure of the earth. That model proposes that, at the earth's core there is a vast spinning ball of molten metallic lava. This spinning ball drives what are called "plate tectonics" - the slow movement of the various "plates" or pieces of the earth's crust that float on the surface of the earth's vast ocean of subsurface material. This is why, over billions of years, the earth's continents collide, break apart and constantly change shape and position; it's how mountain chains and oceans form and disappear. One unfortunate side-effect of this process, however, is earthquakes and volcanoes: when the subsurface tensions caused by the movements of the "plates" erupt, or the pressure from the underlying lava builds up to breaking point, devastating geological consequences follow. The earth's crust buckles and collapses in an earthquake; volcanoes erupt, spewing vast amounts of lava and often poisonous gas; tsunami waves form out at sea and then rush with annihilating speed toward land. The result can often be human casualties in the hundreds of thousands.

But this same process that threatens human existence also helps protect human existence. Because the ball at the earth's core is metallic in nature, its spinning produces a vast electric charge that envelopes the earth in what scientists call the "magnetosphere". This "magnetosphere" forms a barrier or shield around the earth, deflecting the ultraviolet and other solar rays that would otherwise destroy life on this planet. The reason why the planet Mars is, so far as we can tell, a barren lifeless rock is because it has no magnetosphere: the Sun's rays wash over the planet uninterrupted, irradiating everything and making organic life impossible. Earth has life because it has a magnetosphere: the very ball of lava at our planet's core that threatens our existence through volcanoes and earthquakes and tsunamis also protects human life by warding

off the annihilating rays of solar radiation.

And that's what I think the fundamental truth about life is: it is vulnerable and precarious and often tragic and terrible; but it is also extraordinarily abundant and resilient and joyous and beautiful. The two don't cancel each other out; rather, they co-exist in a terrifying and gladdening simultaneity we call "reality".

So what, then, is the place of faith in this viewpoint? Quite simply that God doesn't promise us guarantees and outcomes - especially if we are "good" and "obey the rules". God doesn't say that if we are obedient God will protect us and ensure we have happy lives. Instead, what God offers us is solidarity and relationship: God promises to faithfully walk with us and accompany us through all of life's messy, complex reality. All that is required of us is that we are attentive to God's invitation to relationship, and that we respond to that invitation through the course of our daily lives. Whether this is through prayer, or caring for others, or even arguing with God and demanding to know what the *@#! does God think God is doing - all of this involves a dynamic interaction with God, part of our response to God's invitation.

Some might object that this is a rather bleak view of faith, one that doesn't contain much joy or hope. I disagree. Because the joy comes from knowing that God issues God's invitation to us, and extends solidarity to us, regardless of whether we are black or white, male or female, queer or straight, rich or poor, powerful or helpless, devoted believer or angry atheist. God couldn't care less about our "success" or "achievement" or how "worthy" we are or whether we are sufficiently "pious" or "holy". God seeks out all of us as we are in the fullness of our humanity. As the title of the hymn declares: "Come as you are, that's how I want you."

And the hope comes from knowing that the one promise that God does make is that there is nothing about us that will have the final word in human reality. Not

our greatness nor our shabbiness; not our strength nor our weakness; not our creativity nor our destructiveness. The final word belongs only to God, and to the redemptive, reconciling judgement of God that expresses God's love for us all. It is God who will have the final word: and in all the ambiguity, uncertainty, and terrible beauty of being, it is in this steadfastness that we can walk, and in this faithfulness that we can find both hope and joy.

Remember In Your Prayers

Please continue to remember Marj Roberts and her family in your prayers, and give thanks for her ongoing care as she transitions from hospital to rehabilitation.

Remember These Dates!

If you enjoyed our fellowship last week with our friends at Ringwood Uniting Church, please note these future dates for shared services and their locations in your diary:

Oct 29 – 5th Sunday in the month (Ringwood)

Nov 26 – Christ the King Sunday (HUC)

Blessings,

Brendan





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