

“Realistic optimists”

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Psalm 14, Ephesians 3:14-21, John 6:1-14

Where lies the balance in the Christian faith between being a pessimist or an optimist? Psalm 14 presents a grimly pessimistic view of the world and of people – after citing people’s corruption, foolishness and perversity, the psalmist twice in his first three verses states “there is no one who does good – no, not one.” The psalm pictures God looking down on earth seeking to find someone, anyone, who is worthy, anyone who rightly seeks for God, but God finds not one. Humanity is corrupt, evil.

This pessimistic view of people is echoed in several elements of our faith. The awareness that we are all sinners, that none of us can claim any sense of perfection or absolute righteousness, that we have been sinners even from before we were born, the old doctrine of original sin and the depravity of mankind. Every Sunday when we come to worship we join in prayers of confession, acknowledging our sinfulness, our failings before God, week in week out. Not much cause for optimism there!

When Jesus began to wonder how 5000 people might be fed, his disciples Philip and Andrew responded with apparent pessimism. “Six months’ wages” said Philip, “would not buy enough bread for each of them to get even a little”. Andrew found the boy with five barley loaves and two fish and said plaintively “But what are they among so many people?” They’re at least realists if not downright pessimists, those two, Philip and Andrew.

Yet the 5000 were fed! A miracle took place. Jesus was never pessimistic about the possibilities of feeding, healing, renewing and transforming lives.

Our third reading today, from Ephesians, gives us further grounds for optimism. It’s a beautiful prayer for the church community at Ephesus. Its complete assurance that Christ is available to us, and that Christ’s love is bigger than anything we can imagine, provide beautiful reasoning for an optimistic approach to life. I love Paul’s language of being “filled with the fullness of God” – what fills God is love, that is what God is most about, love, so Paul’s prayer is that the Christians of Ephesus may find themselves filled with God’s love, filled to overflowing. The twelve baskets of leftovers after the feeding of the 5000 is another striking image of the overflowing love of God. Reason for optimism.

Back in the 1930s, a Church of England clergyman wrote a weekly column for the Evening Standard newspaper. William Inge was the dean of St Paul’s Cathedral in London. Because his columns often referred to the failings of politicians and community leaders, the fearfulness of the 1930s world outlook and pessimism about government policies, he was given the nickname “the gloomy dean”. He defended himself against this with a famous quote – “No Christian can be a pessimist, for Christianity is a system of radical optimism.”

Radical optimism. At the root of our Christian faith is the belief that God loves the whole world, that God knows what is going on, that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love, and that ultimately God is in control, so that whatever difficulty or suffering we face there is always reason to be optimistic. That’s why the phrase “radical optimism”.

Personally, I prefer the term “realistic optimism”. We need to be clear-eyed about the nature of humanity – that there is far too much greed, selfishness, hunger for power, indifference to suffering and need. But we can also be optimistic about using our God-given abilities to work in the interests of compassion, caring, justice and peace.

For me, there are three main reasons for being an optimist. The first is simply the fact that God loves me. If you know you are loved, then you can face almost anything with equanimity, and when you know it's God who loves you – along with your family and friends too - then you receive and experience a constant deep joyfulness in life that enables you always to be optimistic, in any circumstance.

The second is that we Christians are resurrection people. Not even death is the end of life. While none of us particularly want to hasten the end of our lives here on earth, we do not fear death, we do not regard life as futile or meaningless. Rather, we know we can receive God's help every day to live useful purposeful lives, and we know we can look forward to an eternal life with God, in peace and joy and love, beyond our earthly deaths. We are resurrection people.

And the third reason I'm an optimist is that we can in fact will to be optimistic. When checking out the writings of Dean Inge this week, I came across an apt quote from of all people, an Italian Communist, from the same period between the two world wars. Antonio Gramsci wrote "I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will". That's realistic optimism. Of course Gramsci was no believer in God, but even he recognised that you can will to be optimistic. As Christians, knowing God loves us and is with us, we surely find it much easier to muster the will to be optimistic.

Even Psalm 14 ends up with a note of optimism, concluding that despite all the failings of people God will act to restore goodness and prosperity, and "Israel will be glad". And if you're ever feeling a bit down, tempted to be pessimistic, turn again to the fabulous prayer in Ephesians chapter 3, and let the language of that prayer wash over you – "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fulness of God".

Christians are optimists. Radical, realistic, optimists. That's us. To the glory of God. Amen.