

Passing on the baton

Sermon at the chapel at Churchill College, 9 June 2024

Readings: Isa 6:8-12; Lk 12:9-19, 25-28

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Bridget and I have been out canvassing. This is part of a Greenpeace campaign to persuade people to be ‘climate voters’ and to make that a key test over whom to vote for. It is a challenge – not that anyone has been rude to us – but because it can seem futile. Most people we meet are concerned but feel impotent. Real change depends on financiers and politicians and, with the Labour party rowing back on its climate commitments, how can one’s vote count for the environment?

By the way, the answer partially lies in observing how voters for Reform UK are driving the Overton Window rightwards – the centre of British politics has moved significantly and even climate scepticism has become a respectable opinion, despite the clear science. Reform and its allies are proving much more effective than climate activism. The latter has proved a strategic mistake that has had the perverse effect of shifting the centre rightwards and making it more difficult to have level conversations. I think the way forward for environmental campaigning may lie in community engagement, especially in communities that feel left behind.

But it is more than climate. You can see from people’s unkempt homes, and not just from what they say, that they are struggling with life. And they speak of their disillusion with politicians. I predict that turn-out in this general election will be massively down. It is not unthinkable that, after a Labour government fails to shift the dial, that Reform could form the government in a few years.

Despite its sense of futility, canvassing seems something I am called to do. It is part of my aspiration to try to do my bit to make a better world. Though even to use that phrase is arrogant and hypocritical of me, I fear. Nevertheless, perhaps most of you might identify with that broad aim. The thing is, ‘doing my bit’ has taken, and does take, effort, both practical and emotional. It takes courage. I am not a courageous person (a brush with the law twenty years ago in such an effort is a frightening memory), so that element of the work does not come naturally. It also takes hope, while I am very prone to despair, bordering on depression. So I am speaking to myself as much as to everyone here. As I near the end of my life, I want to encourage all of us to work for justice, peace and nature. Forgive me for taking this opportunity to share some of my thoughts.

Let’s start with courage. Last year I came across an extract from a speech by J. M. Barrie, the once-famous author of Peter Pan, on courage. He had been elected as Rector of St Andrews University by its students – the Rector of an ancient Scottish University is a remarkable institution. They are elected by the student body and chair the university’s top council; something for Cambridge students to agitate for! – In 1922, not long after the war to end all wars, he challenged his electors as follows:

[The] youth have for too long left exclusively in our hands the decisions of national matters that are more vital to them than to us. Things about the next war, for instance, and why the last one ever had a beginning... Do not be too sure that we have learned our lesson, and are not at this very moment doddering down some brimstone path...

By the time the next eruption comes it maybe you who are responsible for it and your [children] who are in the lava. All, perhaps, because this year you let things slide...

Courage is the thing. All goes if courage goes.¹

This seems a word from the past to our own day. We are witnessing the rise of the far-right across Europe and America, including demagogic leaders. And with the war in Ukraine tilting and Taiwan under pressure, it is unclear whether a USA under Trump would be motivated to join the defence of Europe and freedom. And there are the underlying environmental crises that could threaten the global economic model and social stability. So, repeating Barrie, don't let things slide. Courage is the thing.

Take courage, and take hope.

Of course, at the level of history it is evident that not all efforts to make a better world succeed. Courageous acts may prove futile in their outcomes. Over the great span of history it seems, not only are all periods mixtures of good and bad, but also that there is a sort of oscillation between somewhat better and somewhat worse periods. The recent history of the end of the Soviet empire and of apartheid in South Africa in the 1990s ushered in a season of hope, expressed most hyperbolically in the book title, "The End of History". Things do not look so rosy now, and Francis Fukuyama, the book's author said in 2017, "twenty five years ago, I didn't have a sense or a theory about how democracies can go backward. And I think they clearly can."²

My repeated retort is that hope is a spiritual discipline, not an estimate of probabilities. Courage, likewise, and more obviously so, in that the greatest courage, and the noblest, is shown when the odds are stacked against it. This brings me to the favourite topic of the transcendentalists, the predicates of the essence of being: goodness, truth and beauty, all in unity. (At this point I must

¹ J M Barrie (1922) *Courage: The Rectorial Address delivered at St Andrews University May 3rd 1922*. Hodder and Stoughton, London; gutenberg.org/files/10767/10767.txt

² Francis Fukuyama (2017) Phone interview reported in <https://nationalpost.com/news/world/the-man-who-declared-the-end-of-history-now-fearful-of-the-very-fate-of-liberal-democracy>

acknowledge the influence of Erazim Kohak³.) Although these are instantiated in particular moments in time, they are of the eternal nature of Being. And by ‘eternal’ I mean something close to timeless rather than never-ending or life-after-death, perhaps akin to Plato’s realm of ideas. Using Kohak’s terminology, the transcendentals are real in eternity, while the happenstances of time that exhibit them belong to the realm of the actual. The transcendentals are eternally ingressing into time; moment by moment we experience them: a mathematical proof or an insight into a person, an act of generosity or a wise constitution, a desirable body or the proportions of an architectural interior. They are justified not primarily by their effects but by their very nature. They are ends in themselves, not just means to other ends. They are not about efficiency, let alone preference satisfaction.

From a Christian point of view, the death of Jesus is the type example. It is an act of courage and of love. The resurrection is not a reversal or an effect achieved. It is, rather, the affirmation that the love within the death really is eternal and that that love has, and always will be, eternally present at all moments across time and history and beyond.

Similarly, therefore, from this eternal perspective, it is worthwhile to engage with acts that aim to make the world a better place, even if they fail to do so within the world of time. We recognise the nobility of the act itself. By such acts, humans inscribe their actions into eternity. But to say this is ‘worthwhile’ is too materialistic a way to think about it. It retains a frame of ethical consequentialism. Older normative ethical approaches, such as those that prioritise duties or virtues, remind us that the transcendental of the Good can have little to do with effective consequences (‘better worlds’). Good acts should be undertaken for their own sake, because they are right.

³ E Kohak (1984) *The Embers and the Stars; a philosophical inquiry into the moral sense of nature*. Chicago University Press

This non-consequentialist way of thinking is most clear in the case of Beauty. Fundamentally, a work of art does not have a purpose, although it may induce joy. The function of a work of art may be to be didactic or prompt devotion, or be functional – think of craft – and of this function one can ask whether or not it is good at its task. The basic aesthetic question, however, is, “Is this beautiful?” And beauty is in no way restricted to human art. A beautiful sunset is not put on for a purpose. Even if it happens to prompt us to acknowledge the glory of God, that is because it is in itself an instantiation of the transcendental, Beauty, and thus a window onto God, the originator of Being and its transcendentals. The sunset has no purpose to be either a pointer, or an argument for God. Somewhat tangentially, I am reminded that Orwell wrote, “earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it.”⁴ Beauty just thumbs its nose at both oppressors and bean-counters.

My argument so far may seem to undermine my call to activism. This a-historical perspective of the transcendentals might suggest that all we need are random acts of kindness. Planning, priorities, partnerships, these are very practical requirements for achieving a better world, so are they not justified on the grounds of their effectiveness alone? Collective and strategic work, sustained over many years, is necessary if change is going to happen. It is not a lightning strike of a transcendental into the historical process. But maybe this is the moment to mention Truth. The necessity, though not itself sufficient, of such sustained and strategic effort is itself a truth, whether or not the obstructing forces are strong enough to resist.

⁴ “The atom bombs are piling up in the factories, the police are prowling through the cities, the lies are streaming from the loudspeakers, but earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it.”

“Some Thoughts on the Common Toad,” *Tribune* (12 April 1946, [page 10, last paragraph](#))

For me, I try to keep reminding myself of another favourite saying: it is not my job to save the world, but God's. However, I am called to try and discern what I am meant to do and to be within the divine plan and then to do that with as much courage and determination as I have been resourced with.

All has been rather earnest so far, grim even, picking up our crosses etc., so let us conclude with joy. It is the second fruit of the Spirit after love. We are to have fun – not just the forced fun of well-meaning events at earnest conferences – but the fully immersed, in-the-flow fun, such as of excited humans together. When life is particularly hectic and serious, we may only be able to snatch brief occasions for what gives us joy. It is also important, therefore, to stop momentarily and notice the shafts of joy that just come unbidden to us: shared laughter, a loving moment, a sense of achievement. Many of us here know the joy of music-making. Here comes a shameless plug for Scottish Country Dancing, my great joy. It is not merely music; it is exercise and pattern and sociality and beauty. Descending to ends-to-means for a moment, it also proves itself to be an excellent way to find your life's partner!

Joy is also an eternal instantiated into our daily lives and, as such, is allied with worship. This may seem a strange thing to say as services can be dutiful and serious – even seriously boring. Even so, they are organised opportunities set aside to enable transcendental connections with the eternal. As we join with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, as the liturgy puts it, we are caught up in the joy, the love, the ultimate nature of Being, which I would call God.

So, for those leaving this summer in particular, but for all of us, as you face what you may feel to be an uncertain future:

Do not be afraid; get stuck in with courage. Don't let things slide.

And hold onto hope, that whatever is worthwhile is eternally so, come what may.

And remember there is no duty to be glum or weighed down by the state of the world. Be joyful, look up and hold your heads high: you tread the threshold of eternity that accompanies you moment by moment – we are accompanied by what I might call the Spirit of Jesus, or by whatever you might understand it to be.