

## Nigel's retirement sermon

20 January 2022

There were several texts from other religions and beliefs in the service. The NT passage was Romans 8.18-25

This is going to be dense, so listen up!

This is my second sermon before the university. My first, at my arrival in 2005, was in another era. An era of desire. And my sermon then, do any of you present then remember it?, attempted to set out what Christianity might offer in replacement for retail therapy; what its understanding of desire was. Now, however, I am attempting to set out what Christianity might offer to a world of fear and despair.

“Never had it so good.” After the nadir of the mid-twentieth century, I and other baby-boomers grew with growing health and wealth. Even the shadow of the Bomb was lifted by the fall of Communism. Apartheid ended much more peaceably than expected. And there was the Rio conference in 1992 holding out real hope for the environment.

And then, Copenhagen in 2010 took what wind there was left out of the sails of the environment movement. The crash in 2008 shook global capital, but, not wasting a crisis, it returned more powerful than ever. Russian and China have returned to bellicosity. Populism expresses a lost faith in neoliberalism, but hands more power back to the super-rich, further undermining democracy. Covid may be a blip, but long gone are notions of a work-life balance, whether within a day, a week, or a lifetime, as retirement for younger people is further delayed (even I have only just qualified for a full pension at nearly 69). The recent UberEats advertisement ironically evokes desire for exotic, but fast, food among exhausted office workers – and when will the UberEats deliveryman get to eat, and who will deliver to him?

And me, I can look forward for some years of active retirement before I become elderly and die. My biblical four score years is now eleven years away.

As we look to the future, how do we hope?

I speak now as a Christian, to share my thoughts. I hope you may find at least some of them helpful, but I recognise that you may not. If so, I can only request your forbearance.

“Hope is a spiritual discipline, not an estimate of probabilities.” I keep reminding myself of this. I remind you. At the level of probabilities, global temperature will rise more than 1.5 degrees. As a certainty, I shall die. Hope as a spiritual discipline does not lie there.

In recent years I have been fixated on the classical triad of transcendental values, goodness, truth and beauty. I sense they have an eternal quality about them, pointing beyond a purely material world. Our Western culture has picked up on these Classical insights.

The Enlightenment philosophers, e.g. Locke and Kant, were struck by the existence of morality, goodness. And grounded their speculations on eternal life on the phenomenon of morality's existence. Evolutionary biologists have attempted to account for its existence within the frame of selfish genes, but set their sights no higher than an explanation for altruism. To my mind, not only is this thin gruel, but it does not easily account for the evolution of mutualisms such as the eukaryotic cell.

The Romantics fell in love with beauty. Does changing fashion demonstrate beauty is no more than taste? Or is taste, like genetic diversity, the mechanism to explore ever wider experiences of what is beautiful? Does the ache of beholding beauty evince something more? I find it hard to embrace, even to notice, beauty for fear of its loss.

And we humans cannot agree on what is true, so how is that transcendental and not just relative? And yet is there not inescapable truth in the factfulness of the presence of the other in all their difference and strangeness. And this presence persists in their absence, such as after their death. This is a truth we are compelled to face in managing our lives in community and in a physical world, compelled paradoxically even by our disagreements over truth. And there remains the ground truth that there is something rather than nothing.

Practice noticing these values and giving thanks for them.

Disclaimer: I am an amateur theologian and not a philosopher. There are ways to explain away the apparent transcendence in goodness, truth and beauty. I can only ask you, "What is your intuition here? Are these tugs on your arm offering false hope?" I would add this request, that you set to one side what our age finds credible, for this also is a fashion, and in our day is a scepticism that reinforces a social and economic system that relies on us reducing ourselves to the merely material in order to remain producing and consuming cogs in the capitalist juggernaut.

But there is more for me, much more.

"God is as he is in Jesus, therefore there is hope." The great slogan of David Jenkins, late bishop of Durham.

Like the bishop, I used to sit light to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. I have become more convinced in recent years, not so much of the accounts themselves (which I see more as theological commentaries on the event) as by the trace it left.

I was always unclear as to how else a group of frightened and disloyal followers could become the bold and fearless crowd responsible for growing the church under adversity. And how did the early Christians, who were Jews, so lightly shift from the sacred observance of the Sabbath to celebrating the first day of the week? Alternative explanations are always possible, but what has shifted my recent thinking is the discovery, I think we can call it that, of new interpretations of St Paul's letters.

Two passages are remarkable to me. Paul, once a committed orthodox Jew, for whom the singularity of the One God is at the heart of his faith, takes two different passages from the

Hebrew bible that resolutely assert the oneness of God and applies them to Jesus. And he does this without argument, as he assumes his readers share his belief that Jesus is in some sense the One God of the Jews. Within a mere decade or two of Jesus's death, while most of the people who had known him were still alive, this seismic transformation had become commonplace. What had taken place to effect this?

This now gives colour and content to the intimations of immortality the transcendentals provide. And the richness of scripture and Christian tradition, theology and worship, gives me profound hope and spiritual practices to nurture it.

But what if I am wrong? Here I disagree with St Paul, and offer a sort of inverse Pascal's wager. Suppose that after my death I have a fleeting awareness of the nothingness before it closes in around me, and in that moment I reflect back on my life. Would I think my life wasted for basing it on a false hope? No. It would have given me resources to sustain me in trial, occasions of intense joy and beauty, restorations after guilt, shame and failure, and motivations to love and to give of myself. There is so little lose in taking this risk, even supposing I have some choice in the matter.

Hope is a spiritual discipline. It is also a moral praxis.

Greta Thunberg has said, "I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day, and then I want you to act." I disagree with all but the last clause. Anger and fear are poor springs to effective action and are likely to lead to unfortunate repercussions. Decisions made in panic are often the wrong ones, and actions that express anger tend to generate an equal and opposite anger in others – as I think we have seen. However, she is completely right in that hope that does not lead to action is not hope at all, it is merely wishful thinking.

Hope is the great motivator, to press on against all set backs and obstacles. It energises us to strive for justice and peace. It produces the dedication needed to express beauty. It gives the courage to speak up for truth.

We are educationalists. We know that truth is not an assertion, but an exploration. One of our society's most urgent tasks today is to explore truth across the divides and tribes. To speak to each other about our dreams and fears, and about the practicalities of our lives. And if to speak, even more to listen. Some of you may know of my involvement in drafting our university's Good Speech Policy. It was a task dear to my heart. And yet it was only a step onto the threshold, the next step into actually speaking and listening is the critical one. I am delighted at all the work going on around race, and especially our student ambassadors.

But that may be a next step to far, and an intermediate one is required first. This has come home to me this part fortnight in response to a report from Virgin Media and Global Action Plan called "Supercharging the Climate Conversation." Their research into 15 to 24 year-olds found that many young people lacked the courage to talk about climate change, its causes and remedies. As with mental health, I now believe that we need an essential first step ('first' in the journey of some people, while others are already ahead). Before talking about

climate we need to talk about talking about climate. As with mental health, the campaign is to bring people's hopes and fears out of the closet, to give people courage to speak, never mind what they say of their experience. I am sure that we need to include all points of view so that no one feels they cannot speak, within the rule that they must not try to silence others. This is my one concrete suggestion this afternoon. Conversation is both good in itself and will free us to act.

But human action is limited. The understanding and capacity of humanity is finite. The physical science is the easy part, changing society the hard part. We are certainly very small voices as individuals. At this point, for me, my Christian belief that it is God who creates and recreates the world steps in to sustain hope. We each have a part to play, and God calls us to play our part – but only our part. The salvation of the world is the divine task, not a human one.

So we wait upon God in lives of prayer and witness.

It is Candlemas in a few days. The infant Jesus is brought to the temple and the aged Simeon and Anna encounter him – as a retired person I am beginning to identify with them. They had been waiting and looking with eager expectation for the work of God, and now they saw it in the new-born baby. Joyfully they spoke of this to all who would listen. Right at the end of their lives their hope was confirmed.

Simeon's song, the Nunc Dimittis, has shaped my spirituality much of my life and I leave it with you as my gift of hope.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word.  
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation;  
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;  
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles :  
and to be the glory of thy people Israel