

Fight the good fight

Joel 2:23-32; II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

There is an ancient biblical proverb that says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."ⁱ I wonder to what extent such wisdom can apply to the state of British politics at the moment. It could equally apply to world politics and economics, or the response to the global ecological crisis, or the complex issues around refugees and immigration, or what the Church should be seeking to do and to be as we move into God's future.

The writer of that ancient Bible proverb understood that when our public life falters or fails, it is usually for a lack of vision. In our own society, the 'vision problem', or more accurately, the acceptable and sustainable and agreed vision problem, has been well and truly exercised in these recent days.

Without real solutions to pressing and increasingly urgent social, political and economic problems, that treat fairly, compassionately and honourably all people, then the people are indeed 'perishing', both literally and spiritually.

Up and down the country, highlighted in news reports a few days ago, churches have been stepping up to help. Supporting food banks as we have done, or hosting 'warm rooms' where people can come for a few hours to heat up. One Church of England vicar standing in her church which acted as a food bank, warm room and simple café said without bitterness but with real feeling that whatever the Government was doing, "we don't see it here." Jesus refers to people and communities like these, who have been left behind as 'the least of these.'

When there is no vision, no guiding moral compass that steers our public life, whatever political party you support or don't support, whatever Government is in power, we all suffer. We become

bereft of meaning and purpose. We begin to lose all sense of the common good or our shared humanity, and the bonds of humanity become so frayed that each individual feels forced to find for themselves. The poorest and the weakest among us who are the least able to do that pay the greatest price, but we all are diminished when our society is reduced to the survival of the fittest.ⁱⁱ

It's about the need for vision, a broad, inclusive, compassionate vision. It's about having something worth fighting for; something worth defending; something worth believing in.

In our New Testament reading, Paul, in prison in Rome, knows he's coming to the end of his life. He is no longer travelling about the Mediterranean. His adventuring days are done. He is through with venturing the seas. He is through with walking the city streets and finding the odd job to support his itinerant ministry.ⁱⁱⁱ In a moment of vulnerability, Paul writes to Timothy, a young Christian leader in Ephesus, and encourages him to be steadfast and faithful, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Paul looks back. "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race."

Paul learned in the school of hard knocks that when there are things in which you believe, and are worth speaking out about, you have to stand up, and be counted, and if need be, fight.

There are bad fights and good fights in life. There are fights you shouldn't pick and battles that you are not likely to win. There are wrong causes to support and bad principles to espouse. It's as true in religion as it is in politics.

But there *are* good fights. There are causes where you should roll up your sleeves and get stuck in. There are principles worth defending. There are hard battles, long battles that need to be engaged because the goals – fairness, equality, truthfulness, peace – are worth the effort and worth the endurance. We need to finish the race because, "To be a Christian is to be *en route*."^{iv}

To be a Christian is, to borrow the ideas from the Old Testament book of Joel, to be a dreamer of dreams. To be women and men, old and young who have vision for the future.

The question is, what kind of future? What are the things worth fighting for in our world today.

What are the dreams of a better world that we hold dear, and want to share and make happen?

I want to live in a world where our Christian faith can be put to good use. Where the ideas which shape our faith, given to us by Jesus and others in the Bible, don't remain profound theory or well-intended observation, but actually break into our personal lives and our world so that people not only have hope to lift their spirits, but hope to inspire lives into action. To run the race, to fight the good fight for causes that bring freedom and food and housing and clothing and medicine and education and compassion into the world.

I want to live in a world where discrimination is a thing of the past, and Paul's vision in Galatians, which we can borrow and extend, of a world where it doesn't matter if you are Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, gay or straight, native or immigrant, old or young, rich or poor, whatever you might be, you are loved and valued and respected because you are you, a child of God, named and known and blessed.

I want to live in a world where, despite different emphasis in politics, or faith, or culture, we can live respectfully together; God's rainbow people of hope and understanding and inclusion.

I want to live in a world where the injustices of older people without enough money to heat their homes; or working parents without enough money to feed themselves and their children; or schools where the giving of education has been overtaken by the need to ensure school children have had something to eat; or charities and churches desperately trying and not always succeeding to plug gaps in social care and welfare that rightly belong to the state to provide; where all these injustices are seen as the scandals they are in God's eyes. The God Who for millennia has championed the cause of the orphan and the widow, the leper and the enslaved, the person on the edges and the fringes. Who no longer needs to send to the world prophets and

pioneers who remind us constantly that injustice and unfairness are not God's ways, or God's intention, for this world.

I want to live in a world where the best of humanity consistently overshadows the worst; where the warm-heartedness we saw during lockdown, and the concern for the overlooked, became priorities and possibilities because we focussed again on neighbour and society, and saw the goodness that was possible in small ways, before pursuit of profit and position re-established themselves in a world too often too greedy and too indifferent to the real needs of others.

I want to live in a world where to hope is to learn about God's dream, and then live it. Where hope is learning to dream and then to enact, and to fight the good fight for the good cause; and run the long race; and be faithful, hopeful and loving because that's simply what we are and who we are. Without shame or embarrassment in the fact that this way is inspired by our belief in Jesus Christ, and His teaching of mercy and love.

In a week of harsh words and resignations and political turmoil, where is the hope? Where is the generosity? Where is the kindness? Where is the graciousness? Where are the dreams for a better world that we may have to fight for but is still achievable?

A few days ago, I was invited to attend a service in the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Leith. The two hour service was in Ukrainian, with some English for my benefit. I was asked to say a few words at the end, to bring greetings, to say that though I knew so many of the people in that church that night were present in body, their hearts and souls were back in their fearful, bombed, broken homeland; and that it was a privilege for the Church of Scotland, along with so many others, to offer even a little help. At the end of the evening, an old woman came up to me with her priest. She hadn't been in Edinburgh long, and with him as an interpreter, she said, "You say you have

done little. But it is much. You help us keep our dream alive. You help us fight the good fight for a better homeland, and a return in peace, though the road is long and hard and not all will return.” In our world take your pick from among so many good causes. One that speaks to you, moves you, upsets you, challenges you. Then fight for it, the good fight that Paul writes about. And when you come to the end of your days, you may with honest pride look back, maybe worrying you did too little, but discovering that, in faith, you have done much.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Proverbs 29:18 (KJV)

ⁱⁱ Jim Wallis, God's Politics, pps 24 &25

ⁱⁱⁱ Mary H Scherz, Feasting on the Word Year C, Vol 4, p206

^{iv} Sam Wells, How then shall we live? P15