

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 30 NOVEMBER 2008

Dr John Bodycomb

Isaiah 64: 1-9; Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19; Mark 13: 24-37

"When its Hard Staying Positive"

A feature of church camps in our youth was the songs and monologues we all joined in. Remember? "Nobody loves me, everybody hates me, I'm going to eat some worms." How about this one? Everyone had to join in the response. "Did you hear about the chap who won a plane ride?" "H'ray!" "But he fell out of the plane." "Oooh!" "He had a parachute, though." "H'ray!" "But it didn't open." "Oooh!" "There was a haystack to break his fall, though." "H'ray!" "But there was a pitchfork in the haystack." "Oooh!" "But he missed the pitchfork." "H'ray!" "He missed the haystack too." "Oooh!" We swung between the positive and negative responses, on cue.

Today, coming out of the Isaiah reading, this is about those times when it's hard staying positive. If you think the bible is full of positive thinkers and positive thinking, you've either read it very selectively or had it misrepresented to you! In fact, the bible is full of people and stories that embody the highs and lows of human emotion. That piece from Isaiah, which illustrates the point, actually sounds a bit like a psalm – an ancient song. The writer swings between positive affirmations, and brooding melancholy. Let me paraphrase it.

- He starts angry and despairing.
Oh, if only the heavens would open and you come down to rattle the earth and show the baddies who is the boss. But it won't happen.
- Then he's positive for a moment.
But hey, what you do for those who take you seriously is beyond our dreams. You really do help and bless those who live right.
- Then he's negative again.
But things are real bad. You must be cross with us. We've been bad, and we're rotting like leaves – just fit for the compost.
- And then he's positive again.
But hang on. You made us and you shape us. You're not forever cross with us. I know you'll smile on us again.

Do you know that mixture of moods? This is for those of you who do know that experience. I want to say something about three famous people who found it hard to stay positive; then something about two kinds of spirituality; and then conclude by saying what this means for us.

I

First, three notables who found it hard to stay positive. Today (November 30th) is the birthday of all three, and is partly why I picked them. You may be surprised when I tell you who they were; two of them, any how.

First was Jonathan Swift, who wrote *Gulliver's Travels*; born this day 1667 in Dublin. Swift's father died before he was born, and his mother left him at six in the care of relatives. After university he was ordained a priest in the Church of Ireland, the Irish branch of the Anglican Church. Thereupon he set about writing satirical material, sparing none from his mocking words – church included. So far, so good.

But Swift longed for a post in England; it was not forthcoming, and he became deeply depressed. After a long time in the dumps he broke his silence and began publishing his greatest works. One of these was without doubt *Gulliver's Travels*. The voyager Lemuel Gulliver encounters these little people, one-twelfth the size of humans. All very 'tongue in cheek', it's really a satire on politics and political figures – not a children's tale at all.

But in his early twenties Swift had begun to suffer from Meniere's Disease, a disturbance of the inner ear that produces nausea and giddiness. By his sixties this was worsening. His memory was going, and he deteriorated steadily. Various a gifted and witty satirist, Swift was once more a dark and gloomy person; not at all one with a spring in the step and a song in the heart. He knew the extremes.

Second birthday figure is Mark Twain, the great humourist, born this day 1835. His real name was Samuel Clemens, but everyone knew him by his pen name. Mark Twain had six siblings, and three died as children. Then his father died when he was 11, and he had to go to work. Not the best start, but he was a determined person.

He became an apprentice printer and started writing humorous pieces. At 22 he became a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi. He persuaded his younger brother Henry to join him on the river, and was stricken with grief and guilt when Henry's boat blew up. From this he never recovered.

He married Olivia, by whom there were four offspring. Their only son died at 19 months. Two of his three daughters predeceased him, as did Olivia. The death of one daughter, obviously his favourite, plunged him into unrelieved sadness. The standard of his writing deteriorated, he went broke, and looked like descending into mediocrity. But he came back from that, to be as greatly loved by the English as by any American. Mark Twain knew the extremes.

My third birthday figure is Winston Churchill, British PM in World War II, born this day 1874. Churchill used to speak of his 'black dog', by which he meant recurrent depression. All his life he was subject to bouts, but dared not name it for fear his career would be ruined. At such times he was shielded by his aides from the prying eyes of the public. They would look after him until he felt right again, concealing his black moods. See, at this time he was the people's symbol of hope and strength in their toughest experiences. One writer says "In that dark time, what England needed was not a shrewd, equable, balanced leader. She needed a prophet, a heroic visionary, a man who could dream dreams of victory when all seemed lost." That was Winston Churchill.

These three I have mentioned (because they were all born on November 30) were not all that odd. They actually stand in rather good company; we'll come back to that in a moment.

II

Second, I want to say something about **two kinds of spirituality, 'wintry' and 'summery'**. Let me tell you where this comes from and what it means. For many years I had admired from a distance Professor Martin Marty, the US professor of history and theologian – not least for his whimsical sense of humour. Not all professors and theologians have that attribute, sad to say! Eighty now and retired, Martin Marty is widely regarded as the most influential religious person in the US.

When I was Chaplain with the University of Melbourne, Martin Marty came to town, spoke at my invitation to some of the senior faculty, but also lunched beforehand in my office on the usual chicken and avocado sandwiches I got from the corner shop. I reminded him that I had once read an

article of his on wintry spirituality and summery spirituality.

He reminded me that his wife Elsa had died of cancer in 1981, and also that he had remarried – this time to the widow of his university roommate, who also had died of cancer. When Elsa died, Marty wrote a book that was different from any other he had written; it was called *A Cry of Absence*. It was a reflection on the psalms, some of which are very gloomy, and what we sometimes experience as the silence of God in the midst of loss. He tells of reading the psalms with Elsa in the middle of the night, when she needed medication. When it was his turn to read psalm 88 (a very gloomy one), he tried to gloss over it. Marty calls it a wintry landscape of unrelieved bleakness. When he tried to skip it, Elsa said, “Who do you think you are to decide what I can take? The light ones don’t mean anything if you haven’t walked through the dark ones.”

And so, Martin Marty talked with me of what he called ‘wintry spirituality’ and ‘summery spirituality’. When Elsa died, the summery people were of no help to him. They tried to say, “Be positive. Look on the bright side. Put your trust in God and God will put a smile on your face.” That sort of thing. He found it all profoundly unhelpful, because he was going through a dark wintry night, and wanted someone who understood that. Then he pointed out to me that one finds both summery individuals and wintry individuals right through the bible; in fact, that wintry ones are there in good numbers.

III

So, where does this get us? Against this background I want to draw **three quick implications for us** – when we find it hard to stay positive, and then rest my case.

First is that having a dark wintry night doesn’t make you a bad person of no faith. In my first congregation, back in the 1950s, a 78-year-old lady told me she’d never had the faith that could move mountains, put a spring in her step and a song in her heart. Life seemed much too serious for her to have that kind of faith. Yet she felt that perhaps there was something deficient in her, because she wasn’t bounding like a spring lamb. In fact, she was one of the loveliest people; her name was Muriel Mathews.

Second, coming out of what I just said, is that on the dark wintry night of the soul you are in good company. It may be a more common experience than you realise. Goethe, Schumann, Tolstoy – and Martin Luther all knew about it. Only when she died, and her life story came out, did Mother Teresa’s great secret emerge. For most of her life she had been in the grip of a dark wintry night where she wondered where God had gone.

And third, the cycle of the seasons means that it is not winter all year long. Winter is followed by the spring and spring by summer. God is still there, around us and within, and that is not something dependent on our moods!

Thanks be to God.