

1.

**St.Lawrence, Bedmond 15.12.2019**

**BH**

I have at home two quite large mantelpiece plaster figures, bought in Koblenz, made in Denmark. They are the Optimist and the Pessimist. Both have their hands in their pockets, the Pessimist looking slightly down and looking miserable and scowling; the Optimist looking up and with a broad smile on his face. Significantly, when you look closely at them you realise that, of the two, it is the Optimist who is carrying an umbrella. While your little grey cells quietly get to work on the significance of that, I'll continue with what I want to say.

When you have weak hands, feeble knees, a fearful heart, poor vision, obstructed hearing' a broken body and a mouth that just won't say the things you know it should, it's very hard to look on the bright side of life. I'm not, of course, referring to anyone here; I'm describing the community of Jewish exiles after the terrible captivity and exile of the sixth century before Christ as they seemed to the prophet Isaiah. It was all there in the reading we heard earlier – "Strengthen the weak hands, make firm the feeble knees; say to those of a fearful heart 'be strong, do not fear'...the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy."

Great stuff! The trouble is, it's all very well for the prophets of the day, the Isaiahs of this world, to have these cheerful visions. The rest of us, like those Jewish exiles in a foreign land, sometimes just can't see an end to the dreadful things that keep happening to us and around us.

It must have been much the same for the Christian communities at the time when that letter of James we heard from earlier was written. Many of them were having to live miles away from their families as a result of terrible persecution of their churches. It had been bad enough when it first began, with the Jewish authorities making use of people like Saul to have Christian believers arrested and thrown into prison, even stoned to death on occasions. Now it was the turn of the civic authorities, governed from Rome, to have them hounded out of house and home and, in far too many instances, burnt or beaten or stabbed to death, or made to fight wild animals or armed gladiators for public amusement. It does rather put into perspective the kind of things that have been putting most of us into the doldrums in recent months and years. For those first century Christians it was all very well for James, whoever he might be, to tell them to be patient and wait for the coming of the Lord when everything would be put right. They and their their brothers and sisters before them had been told the Lord would be coming soon from day one itself. So where was he, and how much longer was all this mayhem going to go on?

## 2.

It was much the same for poor old John the Baptizer. Convinced that his role in life was to get people ready for the coming of that long-awaited Messiah, and equally convinced that his own cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, was that very Messiah, here he was in prison for speaking out about the reigning monarch's immoral life and hearing nothing but gloomy news about the goings on of Jesus and his followers. So it must have been really heartening for him to hear the message sent back from Jesus through the friends he'd sent out, a kind of coded message he would understand but would leave his captors largely in the dark – "Tell John what you hear and see; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them." Ah yes, almost word for word just what the prophet Isaiah had said would be happening when the Messiah came. We can imagine the knowing smile that would appear on the face of the captive John in his prison cell.

All very cheering news for people in the grip of gloom and despondency, visions of better times around the corner, the 'always look on the bright side of life' approach to it all. Couldn't we all do with a bit more of that at the moment.

Mind you, there's another hint about that umbrella held by the optimist in that message from Jesus to John. "The poor have good news brought to them". Just a minute, surely what the poor need is not 'good news' but something to help them get out of their poverty! What the Watford and district people facing tough times need isn't a 'cheer up and think of people worse off than yourself' message. What they need is those food boxes at the back of the church. They need them to be full of the everyday needs of families or of people living in a strange country having just managed to escape from something much worse than poverty, something more like what those Christians at the receiving end of that letter of James had had to face. Cheerful words and uplifting visions don't feed hungry stomachs.

Which brings me back to that optimist with the umbrella.

I love those visions of Isaiah and the other prophets, the ones we hear especially at Christmas time at festivals of lessons and carols; that conviction that even if, as the Kings Singers used to sing, 'there are bad times just around the corner...', in the end, ultimately, perhaps not in our lifetime, all will be well; God's Kingdom will come, the Lord will appear, the planet will be saved, peace and justice will be the rule throughout the earth, God's will **will** be done.

Yes, yes, a thousand times yes. But as the optimist knew well, we have to play our own part in looking forward to those good times by making practical preparations for the bad. Not just for ourselves, but for others.

### 3.

The good news for the poor, the message of optimism, is that **we** are going to feed them and look after their needs. The good news for the weak kneed is that **we** will go and do some shopping for them. The good news for the fainthearted is that **we** will be there for them to help them through their depression. Yes, God's Kingdom of peace, freedom, enjoyment and happiness will come, but the only hands he has to work with and bring that all about are our hands.

As Mother Theresa put it in a not so well-known prayer of hers–

I used to pray that God would feed the hungry or do this or that;  
but now I pray that he will guide me to do whatever **I'm** supposed to do'  
what I can do.

I used to pray for answers, but now I'm praying for strength.

I used to believe that prayer changes things;  
but now I know that prayer changes **us**, and **we** change things.

Or, in the words of an old CSSM chorus, :-

“Mine are the hands to do the work; my feet shall run for Thee;  
My lips shall sound the glorious news – Lord, here am I, send me.

Amen, so be it.