

## DON'T LOOK NOW BUT IT'S RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU

A reflection on faith facing the future

In last week's Connections article, Helen wrote memorably about our world facing a potentially disastrous future: she quoted a writer declaring, 'Soil is being depleted. Oil is running out. Oceans are getting fished out. Species are dying off. Even the climate is changing. We are living at a time when the body of our earth is under attack, and the attacker is not some alien force but our own industrial-growth society.' That disturbing list isn't complete, since it leaves out the crumbling of confidence in long-established social structures like churches or governments, the rise of elements of aggressive fundamentalism within all the major faiths, the swaggering, destructive egotism of powerful political leaders, the decay of traditional moral and ethical values, the replacement of social cohesion by reckless individualism. And the retreat in the western world—though not in the East or in Africa—from organised religion into vague personal spiritualities.

She offered the idea of **Active Hope** as a way of facing such a future, which she defined as taking a clear view of reality, identifying the direction we'd like to move in or the values we'd like to see expressed, and deliberately moving ourselves in that direction.

I want to build on that premise, and, in order to do so, ask you to come with me as I look at some of the texts planted in your orders of service.

Let me start with the verse from a song by one of the Beatles, George Harrison, the brilliant guitarist and song writer they called the 'the quiet Beatle'.

*Images of broken light dance before me like a million eyes,  
That call me on and on across the universe;  
Thoughts meander like a restless wind inside a letter box;  
They tumble blindly as they make their way across the universe.  
Nothing's gonna change my world, nothing's gonna change my world,  
Nothing's gonna change my world, nothing's gonna change my world.  
(George Harrison—died 2001)*

What strikes me here is the radical split between the two halves of the verse.

In the first half, the singer is called out across the vastness of a universe whose dimensions in time and space are still beyond our imagining. His thoughts are said to 'tumble blindly' as they make their way across the cosmos. They meander—like a restless wind confined within a letter box. (What a remarkable image that is! Are they waiting for the arrival of a message from the unknown world out there?)

But in the second half of the verse we hear the voice of defiant (is it frightened) conservatism:

*Nothing's gonna change my world, nothing's gonna change my world.*

Well, at least in one respect that declaration has already been shown to be futile. Harrison died in 2001. For him, everything has changed. Yet, give him credit for bringing together our commonly divided attitudes to the threat or the opportunity that lies beyond our vision—What a rich expression of both the terror and the exultation we can all feel as we face the open horizon of the future.

Now what shall we make of *The Gruffalo*, written by Julia Donaldson in 1999, on the verge of the new millennium.

Her image of the world beyond is darker than Harrison's. Our little mouse-hero is wandering in a deep gloomy wood (familiar territory in folk tales or *The Wind in the Willows*), a wood entirely populated by predatory animals. Everyone is out to eat someone else....and how satisfying that at the end of the story the mouse can settle down in peace and quiet to chew a harmless nut.

This is a story for very young children, so it intends to take them through imaginary threats and fears to a safe conclusion, past the personification of all fearful futures in the dreadful Gruffalo:

He has terrible tusks, and terrible claws,  
And terrible teeth in his terrible jaws.  
He has knobbly knees, and turned-out toes,  
And a poisonous wart at the end of his nose.  
His eyes are orange, his tongue is black,  
He has purple prickles all over his back.  
"My favourite food!" the Gruffalo said.  
"You'll taste good on a slice of bread!"

Sounds rather like Donald Trump! And what is the mouse's secret weapon? How does it escape being eaten by the ravenous beings all around it? By using its *brains* to play off one threat against another. Now in the real world of the future undoubtedly human intelligence is going to be crucial for our survival. But can we be confident that we can smart ourselves through the challenges of climate change, or the appalling greediness of our consumer society or the egotism of some of our world leaders?

Next comes the Psalm Elaine has read for us. It is our oldest text, probably written before 1000BC by the warrior king, David. It looks back from the other side of the future; it was written with hindsight.

*What if the lord had not been on our side? Answer that, O Israel!  
If the Lord had not been on our side when our enemies attacked us,  
Then they would have swallowed us alive in their furious anger against us;  
Then the flood would have carried us away, the water would have covered us,  
The raging torrent would have drowned us.  
Let us thank the Lord, who has not let our enemies destroy us.  
We have escaped like a bird from a hunter's trap:  
The trap is broken and we are free!  
Our help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.*

*(Psalm 24, possibly written by King David—died about 1000BC)*

There's an interesting anticipation of *The Gruffalo*, in some of David's images of the dreaded future—so fortunately escaped. Our enemies would have swallowed us alive; floods and raging torrents would have drowned us (can we replace such images with sea rises and earthquake tsunamis). They had us trapped like a bird in a snare—but just in time the trap was broken and the bird has escaped.

David doesn't offer human cleverness as the reason for survival: he claims direct divine intervention. *Our help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth*. But there's just as much a problem in making such a claim, as for supposing we can outsmart ourselves out of whatever bad things the future has for us. The American theologian James Howell puts it this way:

Does God really take sides? Some of the thinnest, most atrocious theology we overhear in our culture is about God being on the side of—well, of the white people—not the brown people, or the black people, or the yellow people. Or he is on the side of the pious people—not the worldly people or those who can't make their minds up about what they believe or don't believe. Or he is on the side of the people of a particular religious faith or inclination—but not the Muslims, or the Buddhists, or the Hindus or the Jews. Or he is only on the side of those who are straight, or those who think the Bible is literally true.

In fact, God can be on your side, and on the side also of your most implacable enemy. God not only *can* be: God is on your side *and* his side. How strange! And yet God made both of us. God won't settle for less than all of us. God is absolutely committed to the holiness and wholeness of me and him and her and them and all those others.

I hope that *our* understanding of God's providential and loving embrace of the universe and whatever it contains doesn't channel that divine, universal generosity into the little red letterbox of our personal preferences. Which is exactly what a God limited to 'our side' would be.

And that brings me to a modern poem, not embedded in the service. It's by Emily Dickson, a strange, extravagant 19<sup>th</sup> century American poet, who works out of an imaginative spiritual awareness, quite unlike anybody else's. Here is her poem, 'Wild Nights'. The 'Thee' in the poem is capitalised, so what follows is a dialogue with God. And I'm guessing that this poem was sparked by an actual stormy night raging outside the house in Amhurst, in the Connecticut River valley, where she lived virtually alone for most of her life, her poetic talent completely unknown to the world.

*Wild Nights—wild Nights!  
Were I with Thee,  
Wild Nights should be  
Our luxury.*

*Futile—the Winds—  
To a Heart in port—  
Done with the Compass—  
Done with the Chart!*

*Rowing in Eden—  
Ah, the Sea!  
Might I but moor—tonight—  
In Thee!*

*(Emily Dickinson—died 1886)*

Let me read that again.

This poem pictures the future in much the same way as George Harrison (writing 150 years later) does. But Emily's grand image of what's to come is not derived from the new scientific image of a big-bang universe; it comes from the ocean world made famous by American writers like Herman Melville and his *Moby Dick—Ah, the Sea!*

Her sea is driven into frenzy by raging storms and wild winds (we have already met that exact same image for the future in my hymn 'Where the road runs out', which speaks of 'tomorrow's storm' drawing near). But while George Harrison addresses us with the hunkered-down voice of rejection of the future—*nothing's gonna change, nothing's gonna change*—Emily is impatient to launch herself into the storm. She will be no cowering, sheltered *heart in port*. *Futile the winds to a heart in port*, she declares. She's even ready to throw away all the traditional guides to finding your way: *Done with the compass! Done with the Chart!* And we last see her, dimly glimpsed from the shore, strongly *Rowing in Eden*. *Rowing in Eden*: isn't that a remarkable phrase! Her Paradise world isn't that ancient sunshiny garden where Eve could lazily pluck fruit from a God-provided tree: it is a storm-wracked ocean where a lone sailor is toiling towards an as yet unknown harbour.

Yes, God is in the poem, God is somewhere to be found on that wind-swept sea: indeed she daringly imagines herself in a kind of lover's embrace, rejoicing in the wild night outside, and though—unlike King David—'she has no confident notion of a divine power intervening 'on our side', she yearns at the end of the poem for a safe future haven in the arms of God. '*Might I but moor tonight in Thee!*'

What are we to make of these voices addressing the future? Which one of them do you find closest to your thinking about the as yet unknown, lying ahead of us? Harrison's determined *nothing's gonna change, nothing's gonna change*? Julia Donaldson's mouse calmly outsmarting the monsters that confront it? King David's confident *We're so lucky that the Lord is on our side, so no need to worry, folks*? Or Emily Dickinson's *Done with the compass! Done with the Chart! Rowing in Eden*?

I'm not tossing out any anchors in this reflection. Each one of us has to face their own demons and meet their own angels in the world waiting just over the horizon of the present. But I believe we will only succeed if we don't panic and jump overboard, if we continue to row steadily together, if we calmly stick to our task of weaving the unfinished mat, if, in a spirit of active hope, we take a clear view of reality, identify the direction we want to move in and the values we want to see expressed in both our society, and in our church—and actively move ourselves in that direction. Will we meet God out there? Jesus thought so: and the unending, all-embracing love he displayed in his own life remains our best description of 'the astonishing God in whom he gladly moored himself. AMEN.

Colin Gibson 30 September 2018