

God is always there capable of new creativity and new creation

Sermon preached by Archbishop David Moxon

at All Saints, Margaret Street, London on Sunday 26th October 2014

Among the papers found in Hans Christian Andersons study after his death, was an unpublished children's story about a teapot. It narrates as follows:

There was a proud Teapot, proud of being made of porcelain, proud of its long spout and its broad handle. It had something in front of it and behind it; the spout was in front, and the handle behind, and that was what it talked about. But it didn't mention its lid, for it was cracked and it was riveted and full of defects, and we don't talk about our defects - other people do that. The cups, the cream pitcher, the sugar bowl - in fact, the whole tea service - thought much more about the defects in the lid and talked more about it than about the sound handle and the distinguished spout. The Teapot knew this.

"I know them," it told itself. "And I also know my imperfections, and I realize that in that very knowledge is my humility and my modesty. We all have many defects, but then we also have virtues. The cups have a handle, the sugar bowl has a lid, but of course I have both, and one thing more, one thing they can never have; I have a spout, and that makes me the queen of the tea table. The sugar bowl and the cream pitcher are permitted to be serving maids of delicacies, but I am the one who gives forth, the adviser. I spread blessings abroad among thirsty mankind. Inside of me the Chinese leaves give flavour to boiling, tasteless water."

This was the way the Teapot talked in its fresh young life. It stood on the table that was prepared for tea and it was lifted up by the most delicate hand. But that most delicate hand was very awkward. The Teapot was dropped; the spout broke off, and the handle broke off; the lid is not worth talking about; enough has been said about that. The Teapot lay in a faint on the floor, while the boiling water ran out of it. It was a great shock it got, but the worst thing of all was that the others laughed at it - and not at the awkward hand.

"I'll never be able to forget that!" said the Teapot, when later on it talked to itself about its past life. "They called me an invalid, and stood me in a corner, and the next day gave me to a woman who was begging for food. I fell into poverty, and was speechless both outside and inside, but as I stood there my better life began. One is one thing and then becomes quite another. They put earth in me, and for a Teapot that's the same as being buried, but in that earth they planted a flower bulb. Who put it there and gave it to me, I don't know; but it was planted there, a substitution for the Chinese leaves and the boiling water, the broken handle and spout. And the bulb lay in the earth, inside of me, and it became my heart, my living heart, a thing I never had before. There was life in me; there were power and might; my pulse beat. The bulb put out sprouts; thoughts and feeling sprang up and burst forth into flower. I saw it, I bore it, and I forgot myself in its beauty. It is a blessing to forget oneself in others!

"It didn't thank me, it didn't even think of me - everybody admired it and praised it. It made me very happy; how much more happy it must have made it!

"One day I heard them say it deserved a better pot. They broke me in two - that really hurt - and the flower was put into a better pot; then they threw me out into the yard, where I lie as an old potsherd. But I have my memory; that I can never lose!"

Perhaps the reason this story was never published was because it might seem too heavy, or even depressing for a child, it doesn't have a clearly happy ending. And yet it is full of a mature and death-defying hope.

This is very much the crisis and profound faithfulness of St Paul during his last days in Rome, where tradition says that he wrote the second letter to Timothy that we heard a portion of this evening. He has been under house arrest, as recorded in Acts 28, chained to a guard during the day, for some time. He is aware that he could be executed at any time, which he finally was under Nero, probably by being beheaded outside the walls of the city. In this confined and dangerous condition He says in the Epistle tonight “.. *share in the suffering like a good soldier of Jesus Christ*” and he encourages Timothy to be ready to pass on the message that he heard from Paul, after his death “ *to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well*”.

Paul is aware that he is about to be broken and discarded in death, like the teapot in our story, but that his mission has been such a privilege, because he, like the teapot, has been able to carry within him the immeasurable riches of Christ, which have seeded and flowered and given life and beauty. This makes his life and his death so worthwhile and so full of meaning. So different from the apparent message of the reading from Ecclesiastes chapter 11 and 12 tonight, which concludes “ *But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is meaningless*”. And later “*When the doors to the street are closed... when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets*”... and later “*All is vanity*”.

The Epistle to Timothy and the mind behind it are not driven to despair, not overwhelmed by a spirit of fear, but of love and power and of self-control. Paul is an ambassador in chains, of hope. Giving up on hope is always wrong, because it privileges the mind over the soul, even in the face of what we believe to be certain disaster, giving up on hope is always wrong. Giving in to despair is a kind of sin because it assumes that all the outcomes are known, that the future is doomed, that we know what will be the end of all things. But we don't. God is always there capable of new creativity and new creation, even in the circumstances of our death. And God is greater than death: God's purposes are not thwarted by the grave. As the Epistle to Timothy goes on to say after our reading ends tonight, in verse 11. “*If we have died with him, we will also live with him,. If we are faithless he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself*”.

Although Paul is confined in a small space under house arrest, his message of salvation through God in Christ is free and active. The word for salvation from the New Testament is *sozo*, from the Hebrew *yasha*, which means deliverance, or radical liberation and healing. It contains the idea of spaciousness, or roominess. Like a house in which there are many rooms. The concept here is of being freed to rise up and walk, to walk tall after being clamped down, or shackled, or bent over, or burdened. While Paul is chained he can say in 2 Timothy chapter 2 verse 9 “ *but the Word of God is not chained*”. So his words of freedom in Christ go out and reach us today two thousand years later, from where he was chained like a criminal. Even if you aren't certain of the Pauline authorship of the Epistle to Timothy, Paul's spirituality and mind are surely represented in some key way in these words and they carry his vision. This means a lot to me since I live above the place that is now thought to be his house arrest site in Rome.

From this room Paul would have seen the procession of the emperor go by, the clatter of the troops in procession and the triumphant parade of victorious athletes marching to the Coliseum. So he can say, In the case of an athlete, “*no one is crowned without competing according to the rules*”. In his case he has run the race that was set before him and awaits a crown of everlasting life. Giving up on hope is always wrong...

In this hope then we can think of Pope Francis in Rome honouring the tomb of St Paul during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity this last January two thousand years after Paul's house arrest and beheading. I was there at the tomb representing the Archbishop of Canterbury and was accompanied by the Ecumenical Patriarch. In front of four thousand people, in the Basilica of St Pauls Outside the Walls, the Pope took the two of us down to the tomb of St Paul in the centre of the church, and gripping us by the elbows, said words to the effect of " this is what can bring us together, this is our focus". The flowering of the gospel that came through St Paul's life and mission is alive and well and speaking to us now, two thousand years later. Giving up on hope is always wrong.



Then just this last week Pope Francis went on to say

"The Lord asks of us a renewed openness: he asks us not to close ourselves against dialogue and encounter, but rather to accept all that is valid and positive that is offered to us even from those who think differently to us or who adopt different positions. Let us not focus on what divides us, but rather on that which unites us, seeking to know and love Christ better and to share the riches of His love...we are divided against ourselves. However we all have something in common: we believe in Jesus Christ, the Lord... in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We walk together, we are on the same path... let us help each other! Let us receive communion on the way. This spiritual ecumenism: walking the path of life together in our faith in Jesus Christ the Lord."

This is the faith of St Paul, this is the faith of Pope Francis, this is the faith of the Church.

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