

LIVING HOPEFULLY

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds his listeners that God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. That phrase always fascinated me as a child, growing up in Scotland, where the combination of a cold, damp climate and Presbyterian cultural pessimism meant that rain was experienced as a curse. Anyone who has ever stood day after day waiting for the bus home from school as a bitter wind whips in off the North Sea or the Atlantic, driving a soaking, miserable drizzle before it will know what I mean. It was not until I actually visited hot, dry, dusty, water-parched Palestine, not so many years ago, that I realised that rain there comes as the bringer of new life and growth, as sweetness and refreshment and delightful coolness. There, it comes as blessing. It puts a very different perspective on the rain falling on the just and unjust alike.

That experience taught me two things. The first was that the Bible always has to be read in context. The second was that you have to be pretty careful when dealing with the weather in the Bible. The theologian Jurgen Moltmann identifies a tendency among Christians to concentrate on the text they preach rather than the context in which the gospel must be proclaimed, but context is pretty crucial when you're trying to track a hurricane, or read the sky.

Today I want to think about the weather. Genesis 9 describes the covenant God made with Noah in the aftermath of the flood. And the sign of that covenant is the rainbow. Whenever the sky is covered with clouds, and the rainbow appears, Noah is told, that will be a reminder not only to Noah, but also to God, of the promise God has made. A God who needs an *aide-memoire* is an appealing thought; a God who chooses a rainbow is quite delightful. It reminds me of that wonderful poem by the Guyanan poet John Agard.

*When you see
de rainbow
you know
God know
wha he doing-
one big smile
across the sky-
I tell you
God got style
the man got style*

*When you see
raincloud pass
and de rainbow
make a show
I tell you
is God doing limbo
the man doing
limbo*

*But sometimes
you know
when I see
de rainbow
so full of glow
and curving
like she bearing child
I does want to know*

*if God
ain't a woman*

*If that is so
the woman got style
man she got style*

A rainbow's still a powerful sign; though not perhaps in the same context. Small children put it in their paintings because of its **beauty** and **unexpectedness**; it emerges from behind dark clouds and says, *I beg to differ*. For millions of people, its different colours flowing into one another, so you can't really tell where one stops and the other starts, and they all partake of each other, are a symbol of **diversity and inclusion**, whether that is as a sign of welcome to the diversity of sexuality of those who fly a rainbow banner, or the diversity of the rainbow nation, South Africa, or the political diversity of reds and greens and purples and pinks. But for all of them, it's a sign of **hope**, a promise that somewhere behind the dark clouds, the sun is shining. In different contexts, the rainbow has different meanings. I don't know how many of these different contexts would think of it as a sign of covenant. But, without hope, the people perish.

But let's go back to the covenant. It is God's promise that never again will a flood destroy the whole earth. But quite the most remarkable thing about this covenant is the fact that God does not just make it with human beings. It is made with all living beings. Only once does the text address Noah and his descendants. But six times, God makes a covenant with all living beings. The hubris, the pride that puts humankind at the apex of the triangle is given short shrift here.

I doubt though that the Bangladeshis who lose everything in regular flooding, or the inhabitants of Kiribass in the Pacific, whose island home is sinking beneath the rising sea will be placing much faith in the covenant with Noah, and may feel that God has forgotten the meaning of the rainbow. But perhaps God is looking after the interests of other living beings, not us.

Well, perhaps Jesus will cheer us up, divert us back to personal relations and the state of our souls. I don't think so. In our contemporary context, his words are pretty direct. He talks about the weather too. He says, don't pretend you don't know how to read the signs. And throws the challenge back to his listeners; you know what needs to be done, why don't you do it?

The search for our ancestors is greatly in vogue at present, and there's plenty of that in the Bible too. It's a fascinating subject, but really not as important as how **our** descendants, our children's grandchildren, will look back at us. What will we pass on to them? How will they judge us?

At the heart of the Christian gospel is an identification with all living beings, and a demonstration of a different way of transcending limits, not by rolling over them, but by embracing and transforming them. Jesus did not voluntarily seek out suffering, and did not glorify it, but he chose to bear it rather than inflict it on others. The sign of the bread and wine on the communion table are a reminder to us, a bit like the rainbow is for God, that apart from all living beings we have no life, that we are creature not creator, and that what is given, and given up, in love, is never lost or wasted.

The Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote.

Meaning

*–When I die, I will see the lining of the world.
The other side, beyond bird, mountain, sunset.
The true meaning, ready to be decoded.
What never added up will add up,*

What was incomprehensible will be comprehended.

*–And if there is no lining to the world?
If a thrush on a branch is not a sign,
But just a thrush on the branch? If night and day
Make no sense following each other?
And on this earth there is nothing except this earth?*

*–Even if that is so, there will remain
A word wakened by lips that perish,
A tireless messenger who runs and runs
Through interstellar fields, through the revolving
galaxies
And calls out, protests, screams.*
c. Czeslaw Milosz (translated by Robert Hass)

Perhaps the rainbow should be a reminder to us to call out, protest, scream.

Refusing complicity

The first time I travelled outside the west, 20 years ago to a international peace conference organised by the Christian Conference of Asia, my well-meaning, white, western liberal map of the world was shredded into tiny pieces. The experience shattered my illusions, my confidence and all but shattered my faith, as I knew myself for the first time, not just in theory but in reality, as part of an oppressive, dehumanising, environmentally disastrous world order. I became voiceless, I had nothing to say that could adequately express my shame. Silence seemed the only appropriate response. I had come face to face with the complicity with evil into which I had been born; what the church has classically called, in a much-misunderstood phrase, original sin. It took me many months to see that, though I had been born into complicity, I was not responsible for what I did not do. I had no choice about the complicity I had been born into- but I was responsible for the complicity I **did** have a choice about. I could say, 'this is the way things are - but I beg to differ.' I could be a non-conformist. I could choose in every way open to me to put an end to complicity.

I can speak today only for myself, and to a degree for the Iona Community, which has shaped all of my activism. The Iona Community began in 1938, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, and I showed up a few years after the end of that war. But we have both been around for long enough, in a world constantly at war, to learn that the key question for us is that one which Martin Luther King asked, 'How do we keep on keeping on?' Or, another way of putting that is, 'what is our spirituality for the long haul?' And for me, **hope begins with the refusal of complicity**, with becoming a non-conformist. My Asian experience was profoundly important for me, because it took me from conviction of sin through shame and repentance to conversion. It took me from what was in reality a kind of youthful, western, liberal optimism rooted in the myth of progress to a different kind of hope.

It is of the essence of Christianity that it is historical; it does not apply to some abstract or spiritual realm outside the temporal. Reality does not allow us to escape from history-we live what the past is doing now at every moment-and neither does the gospel. We are required, as a fact of our liberation, to engage with history.

Neither is the hope in which we live simply a matter of being forward-looking, of seeing humanity as progressing steadily on to a better future. That was the Enlightenment model, and as much as we progressed, and we did, we also regressed horrendously in the 20th century, perhaps because we did not remember our wounds. Nevertheless, though we carry our history with us, we do carry it into a different future. Someone who in many

ways is a model of the best of Enlightenment thought, the Czech poet president, Vaclav Havel, offers a corrective to facile notions of hope.

*Deep in ourselves we carry hope;
if that is not the case, there is no hope.
Hope is a quality of the soul, and does not
depend on what happens in the world.
Hope is not to foretell or foresee.
It is a directedness of the mind,
a directedness of the heart,
anchored beyond the horizon.
Hope in this deep and powerful meaning
is not the same as happiness because all
goes well,
or readiness to devote yourself
to that which has success.
Hope is to work for something because it is good,
and not only because it has a chance to succeed.
Hope is not the same as optimism
neither is it the conviction that something will end well.
Rather it is the certainty that something is meaningful,
irrespective of the outcome, the result.....(Vaclav Havel)*

Hope is a hot love story

This different way of thinking about hope, while remaining absolutely grounded in the historical process, removes it from captivity to time. Hope, in this deep and powerful meaning, exists in time, but is not limited by it. The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama writes:

Is hope related to the future? Yes. But even more, it is related to love. Hope is not a time-story. It is a love-story. The gospel dares to place love above time. All the healing stories of the gospels, and ultimately the confession of the faith that 'on the third day he rose again from the dead' point to this awesome truth. Hope is as impassioned by love as is every healing word and action of Jesus.... hope is a hot love story. What gives hope is not time, but the power of love.

Hope is the refusal of complicity. Hope is to work for something because it is good. Hope is a hot love story. All of this is a way of saying that I do not think that hope is a feeling. Hope is a choice and then it is an action. It is inevitable that as people committed to environmental activism, we should sometimes feel despairing in the face of our own knowledge of complicity, and this is particularly the case when all our efforts at refusal seem to be met with governmental intransigence and duplicity. But this is not a time to lose our nerve. To **feel** hopeful is a luxury mostly only enjoyed by people who live in stable, peaceful democracies who have the option to feel despairing. To **live hopefully** is a daily decision made by people who have nothing else to retreat to. One of the things that has always amazed me in my travelling, of which I have now done quite a lot, is the capacity to be found in people whose lives are precarious, threatened, filled with unjust and unwarranted suffering, to live hopefully, to actually say Yes to the gift of life with far greater humility, generosity and joy than I ever do. The poet Adrienne Rich writes:

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed.
I have to cast my lot with those
who, age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power
reconstitute the world.*

So what might it mean to live hopefully, casting our lot with those who age after age reconstitute the world. Here is Koyama again.

But what is love if it remains invisible, inaudible, intangible. 'Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have seen.' The devastating poverty in which millions of children live is visible. Racism is visible. Machine guns are visible. Slums are visible. Starved bodies are visible. The gap between the rich and the poor is glaringly visible. Our response to these realities must be visible. Grace cannot function in a world of invisibility. Yet in our world, the rulers try to make invisible the alien, the orphan, the hungry and thirsty, the sick and imprisoned. This is violence. Their bodies must remain visible. There is a connection between invisibility and violence. People, because of the image of God they embody, must remain seen. Faith, hope and love are not vital except in what is seen. Religion seems to raise up the invisible and despise what is visible. But it is the 'see, hear, touch' gospel that can nurture the hope which is free from deception.

To bear witness

This connection between invisibility and violence is particularly strongly evidenced in war: I think particularly at present of the refusal of the 'coalition of the willing' to count the Iraqi dead, of the secrecy around Guantanamo Bay, around extraordinary rendition. But it's also a part of much ecological destruction. Who in the west really knows what is going on in the Niger delta, in Bolivia, in Bangladesh. They merit a couple of lines in the Guardian or the Independent, if that, or a bit more if a celebrity like Sting or Paul McCartney takes an interest in them. Come to that, who knows what's going on with asbestos-poisoned workers in Dumbartonshire, or round toxic dumps in North Lanark. **To live hopefully, to bear witness, means to make the violence done to people and places visible;** to say what we have seen, to ask what is still unseen, to break the culture of silence and to name names. There are, of course, many ways to do this; through campaigns and lobbying and letter-writing and all the things you here have years of experience of doing. Sometimes it is simply to draw attention by presence. When members of the Iona Community sit down outside Faslane, we do not think that blockading is going to close the base then and there. We do it to make visible once again the huge capacity for death and destruction contained in every Trident submarine. It is what EAPPI Accompaniers do in the West Bank and Gaza, in Iraq, in Guatemala. Solidarity teams make visible, often at high personal cost, the violence done to people and places who are not counted.

But bearing witness is about more than just making violence visible. It is also about **making alternatives visible**. Camas is the Iona Community's best-kept secret. It's our outdoor centre on the Ross of Mull, near the Iona ferry. Two miles off the road, over a moorland track, just getting there is an adventure. Supplies have to be carried, or brought in by boat. With no electricity, light comes from oil lamps, wood and peat fires, sunshine and stars. And once you arrive at this remote fishing station, set in old fishing cottages on one of the most beautiful little bays on Mull, there's plenty more adventure to be had: kayaking, rafting, swimming, walking, abseiling, camping out overnight in caves, exploring the rugged landscape of the Ross of Mull. It overlooks an old granite quarry, and there, as well at the activities, we've developed an organic garden and a native species woodland.

When the members of the Iona Community went on pilgrimage to Camas a couple of years ago, one of the tasks they were asked to do by the Camas staff as they were leaving to walk back up the track to return to Iona, was to pick up a piece of rubbish from the large pile lying at the foot of the track, and carry it up to the road-end. There, it would be disposed of in various ways. Some would be collected by Argyll and Bute Council waste-disposal lorries. Some would be taken elsewhere to be recycled. Some would perhaps be carried away by passers-by who could see a useful function for it. This request by the Camas staff was not just a symbolic gesture. It was a pertinent reminder that everything that gets taken down the track to Camas has to be disposed of in some way. And there, two miles from the road, where the lorries don't go, that means everything that is not used or consumed either has to be shipped out or carried out, in the same way that it came in!

Having to assume personal responsibility for the waste we create makes us think differently about it at Camas. If you know you will have to carry every tin can and every plastic bag up the track, you do everything you can to minimise that burden. You re-use everything you can, in the house, in the garden; you recycle as much as

possible of what's left. You try to ensure that what you buy has the minimum of packaging. You begin to ask questions about what you really need, as opposed to what you just think you want. You begin to think differently about rubbish, especially when you are surrounded by such beauty. There's nothing as effective as finding a sanitary towel or an empty crisp packet on the beach to make you aware of the real nature of pollution. This assumption of personal responsibility even extends to human waste products, which are utilised as compost for the new trees that have been planted. Waste management becomes a concern of the whole community, rather than something that is out of sight and out of mind.

Increasingly, waste management will be more and more difficult to keep out of sight and out of mind. Flytipping costs Scotland alone £11million to deal with it. But that's only the tip of the iceberg. A recent survey showed that one-sixth of British food budgets goes on the cost of the packaging alone. And about **17 billion** plastic bags are handed out by the nine main supermarket companies, enough to cover all of Sussex and Surrey. If we continue at our present rate, the whole of England could be covered in plastic bags in just over twenty years! If that seems fanciful, or simply a problem of affluence, anyone who has travelled in poor countries will have seen how the accumulation of rubbish can kill livestock, poison and choke terrain and water and blight whole landscapes.

Waste creates more waste! Only a quarter of what we pay for our food is actually for the food. The rest goes on packaging, processing, transport, overheads, advertising and supermarket mark-ups. And all of these in their turn create waste products which require to be disposed of somewhere and somehow. There is a mania of consumption in here which is producing a mountain of waste which uses up precious natural resources (seven supermarket chains have lorry mileage of 408 million miles a year), pollutes our environment and which we do not take adequate responsibility for disposing of. In the last 25 years alone, the human species has destroyed one-third of its non-renewable resources. We seem to be increasingly unable to distinguish between what we need and what we want, and this inability may, in the end, kill us.

Waste management and responsibility is a part of everyday life at Camas. But it's only a start. Developing the organic garden, both to produce more of our food and to be a means of allowing urban young people to learn about and participate in caring for the environment; nurturing the native species woodland; securing and maintaining the buildings at Camas in ways which are consistent with sustainability, simplicity and responsible energy use; all of these are ways in which the Community is seeking to put theory into practice, to practice what we preach. But above all, both Camas and Iona, in their different ways, are places in which it is possible to reflect on, and heal, the disordered relationship between our needs and our wants. Food and shelter for everyone, community and acceptance, work that contributes to the wellbeing of everyone, safety and adventure, opportunities for creativity and beauty, tears, laughter, silence and song and the invitation to grow in relationship with our habitat, with one another, with our own deepest selves, with God – these are the needs we seek to meet.

Bearing witness is also about making alternatives visible. This is what accompaniers do-but it is also what all of us who choose to live hopefully are able to do.

Resistance and Persistence

Bearing witness is one form of what I think of as resistance and persistence. We are all familiar with strategies of civil and political resistance; to these I think we must add cultural resistance, to the loss of cultural diversity and through an affirmation of the capacity of music, art, language, film, theatre, dance, sport and so on to create new languages for common understanding and to revitalise us in persisting to live hopefully. We must add economic resistance to the power of human greed, including our own, and to the commodification of all of life. And for people of faith, there is, I think, another kind of resistance.

In reflecting on a spirituality for persistence, I have been inspired and challenged by the Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. Speaking of Israel in the Hebrew Bible as a community of intentional resistance to the oppressive power of Egypt, he identifies what he calls **liturgical resistance**, the imagination of a free space outside the

hegemony of the oppressor. Through the regular re-enactment of the Exodus story, using poetry, sacrament, sign and drama, it provided a script for an alternative practice, which incorporated three things:

- The public voicing of pain
- A critique that ridicules established power
- The song and dance of the women as a gesture of defiance

The public voicing of pain

How long, O Lord, will you quite forget me?

How long, O Lord, will you turn your face from me?

How long, O Lord, must I suffer in my soul?

How long, how long, O Lord?

John Bell, Psalms of Patience, Praise and Protest, WGRG

It seems that what we are seeing and hearing now is a kind of modern version of that resistance, as people break through barriers of culture, nationality, religion, politics and status with a public voicing of pain of many kinds that says; we will no longer keep silent about this, it is no longer acceptable to hide the wounds, to cover up for the exploiters, to maintain the front.

A critique that ridicules established power

A critique is not the same as a criticism. It's one of the ways we learn. Here is Koyama again. *The one God embraces the one world which speaks more than 7000 dialects and languages. God is open to all cultures and nations. How many languages does God speak? All of them! No people can speak in an isolated language and have an exclusive self-identity. ...The church is in the world and the world is in the church. God's word to the church is God's word to the world. There are not two words of God, one for the church and another for the world....'*

The song and dance of the women as a gesture of defiance (Bambalela)

Above all, the song and dance which is a gesture of defiance is so because it expresses hope and liberation. This is one of the greatest gifts, among so many gifts, which we have received from South Africa. When people's lives are bleak in so many respects, when they feel powerless and despairing, the most truly counter-cultural thing people can do is live, even for a little while, joy and hopefulness. This is not escapism. It is liturgical resistance.

Creation

I want to end by returning to Camas. The Celts spoke of reading God in the 'little book' (the Bible) and the 'great book' (the creation). People who would resist reading the Bible readily read the creation at Camas. We offer people a space to do that, and give them freedom to draw their own conclusions. Remarkably often, people draw the conclusion that the creation is something to be grateful for, to be respectful of, and to cherish.

Incarnation

At Camas, people are required to live in the 'here' (this place) and 'now' (this moment). People don't have to be defined by either their damaged past or their possible dismal futures. They are accepted in the here and now. It's also a place where bodies matter. People are directly involved in what it takes to feed bodies, heat bodies and deal with bodily waste. Camas communicates the message that bodies are holy, whether it is the human body, the bodies of other creatures or the earth body itself. This life in the present, and this holiness, are incarnational.

Transformation

And Camas is a place of significant change and new possibility for many people. The experience of creation and incarnation in new forms is a liberating one. Christians might call this 'resurrection'. This combination of

empowered action and reflection offers an alternative way of looking at what is most important, and challenges the hegemony of possessions, status, celebrity, appearance, luxury, power, violence, sectarianism, racism and all the other idols of our society.

These three dimensions-creation, incarnation, transformation- are in a dynamic relationship which is expressed in and through community, interrelatedness. I do not think it is really possible to have a spirituality for the long haul, an ecological spirituality, without a community of accountability and support. What we do at Camas, and in the rest of our life and work, is small. But that doesn't make it insignificant. We do what we can, not what we can't. We mourn what has been destroyed, we regret all that we cannot do. But we do not let it paralyse us. For we are also a community of resurrection, of renewal. We trust that in the embracing of the reality of death, there is a gift of enormous agency, a power of love stronger than death, a possibility for transformation. So we choose to live hopefully.

*I will not live an unlived life
I will not go in fear
of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days,
to allow my living to open to me,
to make me less afraid,
more accessible,
to loosen my heart
Until it becomes a wing,
A torch, a promise.
I choose to risk my significance:
to live.
So that which came to me as seed,
goes to the next as blossom,
and that which came to me as blossom
goes on as fruit.*

(Davna Markova)

© **Kathy Galloway**

These texts are only for the personal use and interest of participants in these events, and should not be reproduced. They are copyright © Kathy Galloway, and are not properly annotated. Permission to reproduce any of them, or any part of any should be sought from me at the Iona Community.