

## Despair and Hope

# Francisco Goya , *The Dog*, 1819 and 1823, oil on plaster wall transferred to canvas, 131.5 x 79.3 cm, now in Prado Madrid  
& Albrecht Dürer, *Praying Hands*, c. 1508, pen and ink drawing, 29.1 × 19.7cm, Albertina, Vienna



### *Peter Stuart*

This morning Phyllis and I want to explore the theme of 'Despair and Hoper'. We start with some questions for each of you: in the ordinary course of events, are you an 'optimist'? a 'pessimist'? a 'realist'? or a 'fatalist'? And on what grounds do you give your answers? Are they Biblical grounds?

Look at the two pictures: on the right, the hands of someone praying. Is he an optimist? a pessimist? or a realist? On the left, a haunting image of a lone dog helplessly sinking in quicksand. Some human beings feel like that; or worse, they aren't so much instinctively panicking as consciously despairing. Henry Thoreau once wrote, *'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation'*. An exaggeration, perhaps, but certainly countless individual human beings have done exactly that, while the world has carried on around them much as usual.

But what are **we**, when the **world** hits a major crisis and we're **all** caught up in it? This is what Phyllis and I are exploring today.

*[Jesus said] When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things are bound to happen; but the end is still to come. For nation will go to war against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in many places; there will be famines. These are the first birth-pangs of the new age. [Mark 13:8]*

### *Phyllis Mossman*

# Albrecht Dürer, *Praying Hands*, c. 1508, pen and ink drawing, 29.1 × 19.7cm, Albertina, Vienna



Albrecht Dürer, the German Reformation artist, drew these hands as part of a study for a kneeling apostle. They've become iconic; they touch our universal human essence and our need for mercy. The fingers lead the eye upward; the hands glow with light and life from above. In one simple sketch we see the whole human story; we see our helplessness and plea for mercy. And yet there's serene hope in those hands.

**# Francisco Goya , *The Dog*, 1819 and 1823, oil on plaster wall transferred to canvas, 131.5 cm x 79.3 cm, now in Prado Madrid**



Francisco Goya, the Spanish Romantic painter, three centuries later painted this very different picture - a small dog trapped in something like quicksand, looking skyward for help in an empty, indifferent world - intended as a symbol of man's futile hope for divine intervention. This is one of Goya's *Black Paintings*, painted on the inside walls of his own house. Goya was a court painter but also a chronicler of history. Away from the court he painted what he truly felt about the world. His 'Black Paintings' are savage, bleak; his 'Disasters of War' are unrelenting, pessimistic, in a godless world bereft of belief or hope.

**# Francisco Goya, *The 3rd of May*, 1808, 1814, oil on canvas, 2.68 x 3.47 metres, Madrid: Prado**



One of Goya's most celebrated paintings is *The Third of May 1808*. Likened to Picasso's *Guernica* for its fearless depiction of the brutality of war, *The Third of May 1808* has been described as, "the first great picture which can be called revolutionary in every sense of the word, in style, in subject, and in intention." It portrays the suppression of a Spanish rebellion in Madrid against the French occupying forces. More about it later.

Sadly, it records just one example of an age-old scenario. The fallen human race fights violently – for all sorts of reasons.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus picks up on this scenario. *'When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things are bound to happen.'* But He also refers to earthquakes and famines. Earthquakes are 'natural' catastrophes; famines happen when the balance of nature is upset, sometimes by human agency, sometimes not.

Mark's Gospel places these words of Jesus in a chapter which combines two things: the prediction of a future event within *Israel's* history (the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple), and a more universal event affecting *all human beings* (the birth pangs of the New Age). The first has indeed happened, 2000 years ago. We still await the second, the Coming of Jesus.

St Paul explores this in depth in his wonderful 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of his Letter to the Romans. For him, *'the whole created universe groans in all its parts as if in the pains of childbirth. What is more, we also, to whom the Spirit is given as the first-fruits of the harvest to come, are groaning inwardly while we look forward to our adoption, the redemption of our bodies. It was with this hope that we were saved.'*

### **Peter**

In today's world, there's growing pessimism about the future of our planet. This year I went to perhaps rather too many events in the International Art Festival and in the International Film Festival. And I was struck by the thread of depression and death which ran through so

many of them – especially the best ones. This wasn't cheap sensationalism; far more probably it was a reflection of gut-level anxiety and fear, not unlike that which affected human society at the height of the Cold War with its very real threat of mutual nuclear annihilation.

Certainly there's more than enough to worry about right now: climate change, environmental collapse, pollution of the oceans, exhaustion of natural resources, and population pressure, for a start. If scientists are right, we're facing an absolutely unprecedented threat to the human race and to the whole web of life.

# *These Teens*, cartoon, <https://grist.org/climate-energy/these-teens-are-taking-their-climate-lawsuit-all-the-way-to-the-supreme-court/>



This anxiety and fear is seeping through to younger people around the world. For example, in the United States a group of teenagers have filed a lawsuit against the Federal Government, claiming that its refusal to address climate change threatens their constitutional rights and those of future generations, coming of age in a world of greater scarcity and ever greater danger.

A simple cartoon of teenagers in court, but it makes its point. The young plaintiffs on the left with a banner behind them saying 'profit from pollution is theft'. On the right, Uncle Sam flanked by BP and Shell. Behind them and the judge, another banner - 'claim the sky' - set against what remains of the blue sky overarched by polluting chimneys.

The case is wending its way up through the court system, fought all the way by the White House. Meanwhile the insurance industry has accepted the reality of the risks flowing from climate change, and premiums steadily rise.

Rowan Williams (the last Archbishop of Canterbury) wrote: '*...one of the tests of actual faith, as opposed to bad religion, is whether it stops you ignoring things....The test of true faith is how much more it lets you see, and how much it stops you denying, resisting, ignoring aspects of what is real.*'

Yes, there's a lot of escapist entertainment around to divert us from reality. And there's a lot of bromide religion, including specious 'Christianity', falling into that category too.

Nevertheless, we don't know quite how things will play out. There's plenty of 'rational pessimism' around. But there's also a school of 'rational optimism' which says that some things are getting better, and it produces good evidence about these – and goes on to assure us we can pull through if the world community acts together. Personally, I think the human race will probably survive the century but only after learning hard lessons at immense human cost. But what I do predict (because it's already starting to happen) is that globally there will be **increasing social conflict and a growing resort to 'strong' men**. Which brings us back to Goya's '1808'.

### **Phyllis**

**# Francisco Goya, *The 3rd of May, 1808*, 1814, oil on canvas, 2.68 x 3.47 metres, Madrid: Prado**



200 years ago the Napoleonic Wars engulfed Europe in the wake of the French Revolution, bringing both war and civil war. Goya witnessed the French occupation of Spain first-hand, when Napoleon seized the Spanish throne, provoking widespread popular Spanish rebellion. This painting is set in the early hours of the morning of the 3rd of May 1808, the day after the Spanish uprising in Madrid started.

Two groups face each other: a French firing squad, poised to fire, and a varied group of Spaniards, perhaps resistance fighters, perhaps civilian victims of mass reprisal, about to be shot. There are only victims and killers.

**# Details: Francisco Goya, *The 3rd of May, 1808* (Central figure with arms raised)**



The central figure is the condemned man kneeling with upraised arms amongst a pile of bloody corpses already executed. Others await their fate.



This central figure wears plain civilian clothes. He's painted in white and yellow; traditionally white represented purity, innocence and sacrifice, and yellow represented hope. The man's arms are up in the air, in a gesture which could mean several things – surrender, pleading, or defiance. Yet look more closely: the palm of his right hand is wounded and his stance echoes the Crucifixion.



Beside him (next to a clenched fist), is a monk who is praying ....perhaps a symbol of complicity, or perhaps of the futility of prayer. Or perhaps he too is about to be executed.

**# Whole image again. Francisco Goya, *The 3rd of May, 1808, 1814*, oil on canvas, 2.68 x 3.47 metres, Madrid: Prado**



Goya created this painting to commemorate the Spanish struggle. When first exhibited, his work produced mixed reactions: it was considered un-academic, technically poor, and almost naive. Goya however was more concerned with the impact of the painting, and he was deliberately rejecting the artistic tradition of celebrating war as noble and heroic. Decades later, when war photography emerged, that had the same impact.

There's one crucially important person missing from this painting: Napoleon Bonaparte. He's the 'strong' man who tidied up after the 1789 French Revolution went awry. And note two things: the firing squad doing Napoleon's dirty work is faceless. And the white-shirted 'rebel' in the foreground facing the reality of impending death is not alone: other 'rebels' await their turn to die, or already lie dead. Each of us has to die individually, whatever condition society is in. But amid social collapse and the triumphs of the 'strong' men, we also die together, and without dignity.

What brought Spain and Europe to this moment in Madrid in 1808?

The French Revolution came about for at least two reasons: first, frustration and anger at social injustice; second, the steady spread of the ideology of 'The Enlightenment', a belief that the light of human reason alone was enough to bring order and harmony to human society, and to domesticate nature harmoniously to human needs.

**# Villa Lante, Bagnaia, Italy**



# Some of the gardens at the Palace of Versailles in France



The artificial orderliness of these two gardens (one in Italy and the other at Versailles in France) captures that ideal of human dominance over nature. Achieving a just and peaceful *human* society was another matter.

# Print of a woman representing 'Liberty' installed in Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris during Festival of Reason 1793



Here's a print of the installation of the Goddess of Liberty in Notre Dame Cathedral during the 'Festival of Reason' in Paris, early in the Revolution. This atheistic belief, called the 'Cult of Reason', was established in opposition to the Church, becoming official State ideology in 1792 when the First French Republic was declared. The goal was the perfection of mankind solely through the human capacity of reason, and to that end the French State enforced a policy of wholesale de-Christianisation.

# Jacques-Louis David and Georges Rouget, *Coronation of Emperor Napoleon I and Coronation of the Empress Josephine in Notre-Dame de Paris, December 2, 1804*, 1805-1807, oil on canvas, 621 x 979 cm, Paris: Louvre



A decade into the Revolution, human reason *by itself* had proved a weak instrument to bring in the values of 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity'. The French Revolution turned sour. Tyranny and disorder came; then Bonaparte stepped in, took charge, restored order (his order), and set out to conquer all Europe by force and impose the values of the Revolution. Five years later, in 1804, he promulgated his 'Code Napoleon'; and later that year he crowned himself Emperor of France, in the same Cathedral.

Here's Jacques-Louis David's depiction of that event in Notre-Dame. His is a much more academic, classical approach to history than Goya's. The painting is imposing (almost 10 metres wide and over 6 metres high). David, the official painter of Napoleon, was following orders.

In the picture, Napoleon's wife Joséphine kneels before her husband. Note that the Church (in the person of Pope Pius VII) sits by, manipulated by military and political force to be present - though not to place the crown on Napoleon's head. **Napoleon crowns himself.** This is an archetypal picture of compromises Church leaders have made throughout history.

Four years on, Napoleon is shooting 'rebels'. Thirteen years more, and he dies an exile on a South Atlantic Island. 'Strong' men come - and they go. Though they come again.

### **Peter**

A century later, in 1925, another Pope Pius transformed the Sunday before Advent (next Sunday) into the Feast of Christ the King. He did this as an antidote to secularism, which leaves God completely out of human thinking and living, with all life organised as if God doesn't exist. The Feast proclaims Christ's sovereignty over individuals, families, societies, governments, and nations. Yet the 20<sup>th</sup> Century proved to be the most violent in human history, with 'strong' men of various sorts gaining power, and misusing the technological fruits of human reason. It also proved to be the century when more Christians were martyred for their faith than in any preceding century. This trend continues: today Christianity is the most widely persecuted religion in the world, closely followed by Islam. 'Strong' men (or women) and authoritarian governments do not like religious challenges to their power; so they co-opt, or control, or persecute. And they have always done so. Keep

reminding yourself that the whole New Testament is the product of a Church suffering persecution.

So this is the territory we seem to be moving into:

- disturbance of the balance of nature;
- social disorder and conflict as this disturbance bites home;
- the rise of strong leaders;
- religious persecution.

It's uncomfortably like the scenario laid out in Mark's Chapter 13...

But – and it's an important 'but' - we also have to take into due account the many undeniable social advances humankind has made in the same period. After all, there have been doomsayers in every century. So we need to have access to reliable sources for the good news which the mainline media don't report. Global media sieve out so much of both the unexciting good news and the crucial bad news, and concentrate more on the sensational and the trivial.

So, in the face of all this, is the Christian to be an optimist, a pessimist, a fatalist, or a realist – and on what grounds?

We're humans, so we'll share most of the normal human response to **bad** news: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. And I've met a lot of denial, anger, and depression amongst both Christians and non-Christians when they start seriously facing the reality of our unprecedented global crisis. I've encountered anger and depression, especially amongst informed younger people. Now anger can be productive, and, harnessed, its energy can lead to constructive action. Depression, on the other hand, leads into despair and fatalism and inaction. Or escape into hedonism - which is a form of denial.

But what should be the response of Christians **as Christians**? Where does Christian hope come in? What's the difference between optimism (rational or not) and Christian hope?

### ***Phyllis***

# George Frederic Watts, *Hope*, 1886, oil on canvas, 111.8 x 142.2cm, London: Tate Britain



This picture is entitled 'Hope', painted by the English Symbolist artist George Frederic Watts, in 1886. We see a blindfolded female figure sitting on a globe, playing a lyre that has only a single string. In the murky background at the top, we can just make out a single star. Watts said "I paint ideas, not things."

It's Barack Obama's favourite painting. Obama was captivated by a sermon, the focus of which was Hope. Faith in the face of adversity fascinated his pastor '*The harpist is sitting there in rags,*' he preached. '*Her clothes are tattered as though she had been a victim of Hiroshima... [yet] the woman had the audacity to **hope***'

Nelson Mandela, later President of South Africa, kept a reproduction of this on his cell wall on Robben Island, during his 27 years of imprisonment. He had even greater reason than Obama to reach out for hope.

Both men drew comfort and strength from this picture in their very different circumstances. Both Christian, each saw in it something which enabled them to endure when the going got tough. I wonder what it was? A simple encouragement never to give up believing that there may be something better around the corner?

St Paul, St Peter and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews would all want to add a lot, lot more than that. Paul, for example, in Romans 15, writes: '*May God, who is the ground of hope, fill you with all joy and peace as you lead the life of faith until, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you **overflow** with hope*'. And he bases **everything** on the Resurrected Jesus: '*If Christ was **not** raised, your faith has nothing to it...If it is for this life only that Christ has given us hope, we of all people are most to be pitied. But the truth is, Christ **was** raised to life – the firstfruits of the harvest to come.*' [1 Corinthians 15 17-2]

Christian hope begins with the Resurrection of Jesus and ends with our own resurrection - and with the renewal of God's creation. As St Paul wrote, '*For anyone united to Christ, there is a new creation: the old order has gone; a new order has already begun.*' [2 Corinthians 5:17]

Yes, begun - but far from completed, fully realised: Paul wrote, *'We also, to whom the Spirit is given as the firstfruits of the harvest to come, are groaning inwardly while we look forward to our adoption, our liberation from mortality. It was with this hope that we were saved.* [Romans 8:23-24].

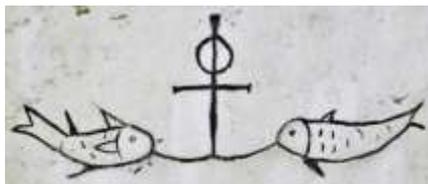
George Watts' picture doesn't go anywhere near to capturing this. But what really could?

**Peter**

**# Jutta Chisholm, *Hope*, Eastbourne**

This painting is by our own Jutta Chisholm. It was part of our meditative service, placed over there in that corner, where we thought and prayed about 'hope'. It certainly spoke to me of one aspect of Christian hope: reaching through pain and tears and confusion to the coming City of God, bathed in light.

**# Tombstone, Cemetery of St Domitilla, Rome**



And another image, this time a symbol: the anchor. For pagans it was a symbol of safety and stability. Early Christians appropriated it as their own symbol, echoing the words of Hebrews 6:19: *'We have this hope as an anchor for our lives, safe and secure.'* Believers' tombs often displayed anchors alongside messages of hope. This moving little one is in the Cemetery of St Domitilla, in the Catacombs of Rome. Remember that Jesus called his disciples to be 'fishers of men' – so here in this coded image are two disciples holding on to the anchor of hope, which is a disguised cross. In fact early Christians favoured the anchor over the cross.

Listen again to St Paul's perhaps most quoted words: *'At present we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but one day we shall see face to face. My knowledge will be whole, like God's knowledge of me. There are three things that last for ever: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of the three is love.'* (1 Corinthians 13: 12-13)

So these are the three great virtues which we must pray for and keep on praying for. I do. In the asking for them, we start to receive them, and by every step we take to practise them, we build them into our inner being. They are gifts which grow in us and shape us by being used.

- Faith: which is our trust in the reality and presence and love of the God we see in Jesus Christ. Christ both crucified and risen; not 'only' crucified, or not 'only' raised from the dead, but both.

- Hope: which is our assurance that, on the other side of **whatever** comes, there will be resurrection, new and abundant life, because our God is both Creator and Redeemer.
- Love: which is more complex. It's our love for God. Yet that love is our response to **His** love for us. And it is His love, not simply ours, which then flows out through us when we love others.

These three gifts join us to Christ in His Cross and His Resurrection. Our sufferings, whatever they are, are caught up into His suffering. Our death is caught up into His death. And His resurrection life, at work in us even now, will bring us to Him on the other side of death. Christ does not save us from suffering or from dying. But we are saved into His resurrection life beyond suffering and death.

And there's more: all our obedient loving service in **this** life is caught up into His resurrection life which is shaping a New Creation. So Paul can assure us: '*In everything, as we know, He [the Holy Spirit] co-operates for good with those who love God and are called according to his purpose*'. (Romans 8:28). And that 'everything' can include the dark days which may well lie ahead for the human race in this century.

**Phyllis:**

We've focussed on Christ's Resurrection and our own resurrection as lying at the core of Christian hope. Now this of course opens the door to a flood of questions about how it relates to the cosmos being revealed by modern science. That needs another sermon or three; in the meantime simply ponder on what it really means for us to say that God is both Creator and Redeemer.

And equally, this focus on resurrection has to be widened to embrace all that the New Testament associates with the full coming of the Reign or Kingdom of God. Like glory; and judgement; and mercy; and the communion of saints; and the vision of God; and the sheer joy of union with God. And how do we bring you a work of art which captures that? Perhaps only by putting the music of the Hallelujah Chorus in your hands and letting you loose on it – after a few rehearsals of course.

So we end this sermon today with two things:

# Salvador Dali, *The sacrament of the Last Supper*, detail of central figure of Christ, 1955, National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.



First, an image which we've used before – part of Dalí's 'The sacrament of the Last Supper' with its youthful Risen Christ – a painting which merges the Last Supper and the meal of the Risen Christ with His disciples on the shores of Galilee and the freshness of the Creation behind Him.

And second, the words which close chapter eight of Paul's Letter to the Romans. Let's ask God to increase in us the gift of hope - and then say together

'For I am persuaded that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths, nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

***A presentation in the Anglican Parish of Eastbourne on 18 November 2018 by Phyllis Mossman and Peter Stuart***