

Ephesians 2: 1-10

John 3: 14-21

Stop the world, I want to get off. I'm sure many of us here today will have heard that or even felt like saying it ourselves. We seem to hear of more atrocities being committed than in past times, though that may, in part, be explained by 24-hour news coverage – the global village effect.

All things said and done, when it comes down to it, there are two fundamental ways to respond to the pain and destruction in this world.

You decide to either opt into life or to opt out, to love this crazy mixed up world or to hate it, to change the planet or to give up on it.

When events conspire against you and endings are all you can think of, then you can give up because you feel powerless. Or you can say, "To hang with it, I'm not going to roll over and lie down, I am going to fight this."

Though it is far too easy to be patronizing on this matter, we cannot and should not be blind to the fact that some people have huge mountains to climb, and all the odds are stacked against them.

Martin Luther King was a Christian minister, and he knew that God had meant this world to be a good place. Creation was meant to be filled with "Shalom." That is with wholeness and goodness and all that is rich and excellent.

He looked at the prejudice and violence in people's hearts and did not give up. He decided it could be challenged. It could be changed. He did not lie down and roll over. And that is the way God means it to be. God too could have lain down and rolled over and given up on this world, countless times. But he didn't. God so loved the world. The lot. Everything he had made was meant to be good.

Everybody, everything.

So, when things went rotten, God still said, "I will enable good to come out of rottenness, and that will be a daily miracle and even though people will experience loneliness and abuse and anger and intolerance, I will find ways to bring the best out of these situations, even though my people are in tears."

As you read different writers in the Bible, you will see them struggling with this one, for their cultures were wildly different.

The Hebrews were positive and believed God as active in creating good in the earth. The Greeks, on the other hand, believed that matter, earth, flesh, were corrupt. Only the mind was pure and that it could escape from the body after death and fly off to a divine world, which was pure.

Many of the first Christians were from Greek and Roman roots. Jesus their founder, however, was a Jew, a Rabbi who believed that you couldn't abandon the world or spend all your time looking for a means of escape. Jesus believed that the will of God could be done on earth as it was in heaven. Earth could be transformed. God loved it.

Down the centuries, Christians have struggled with this one.

Some have stressed involvement in the community, others have taken to the desert or the monastery in order to discover or live a less tainted life.

Some have got on with the ministry of Jesus, continued in countless deeds of service, and have given their lives in the fight for justice and righteousness. Others have hidden away in ritual or cultic communities praying and waiting for the final Armageddon or the climatic return of their Divine hero.

The tension between social action and spirituality is an interesting and less extreme case in point.

Some Christians say you work out your faith in love of neighbour, total identification with the needs of the poor and the marginalised.

Others say: "We must have prayer meetings. We must pray that God will act and do something dramatic about the terrible things in the world. Some people place these in antithesis, when I feel, that both are part of a balanced and wholesome discipleship.

What Genesis and many other books in the bible bring home to us is that we cannot drive a wedge between the spiritual and the material, between sacred and secular. God has created everything to be holy, all things to be sacred. The whole universe is meant to be filled with God's life and praise.

If that is so, then this means that we are in the "Yes" business. We affirm the world not denying it. If, in Jesus, God can say a huge "Yes" to our future, then Christians are in the same business.

And it is not what could be termed, a "local" enterprise either. Perhaps the most mind-boggling, spirit-boggling, and body-boggling discovery is this.

Because God loved the world so much, and because the purpose of the universe is to be filled with God's goodness, the smallest word and deed that gets a "yes", a "bravo" from God actually changes the whole creation. It's not the case that once upon a time, God made everything good and then it went all pear shaped, and we're all waiting for it to come right some day in the future. It is rather the case that every cup of water offered in Jesus' name, every loving thought and inspired deed, every positive, joy-building action, transforms the entire universe, bringing renewal and hope as well as a smile to the angels in heaven. Just think about that. Amazing isn't it?

John Donne wrote For Whom the Bell Tolls. In it he manages to catch the gist of what is meant in the Gospel. Listen to these words for a moment.

"No man is an island, entire of itself. Each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less. As well as if a promontory were. As well as if a manner of thine own or thine of a friend were. Each man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind. Therefore, send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee."

John's gospel is a cosmic gospel, right from the beginning. The gospel starts with the word "Genesis."

"In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and God was the Word was."

In deliberate parallel to the opening words of Genesis, John presents God as speaking salvation into existence. This time God's word takes on human form and

enters history in the person of Jesus. Jesus speaks the word, and it happens: forgiveness and judgment, healing and illumination, mercy and grace, joy and love, freedom and resurrection.

Everything broken and fallen, sinful and diseased, called into salvation by God's spoken word. Jesus is the eternal child of God, the eternal light of the world, the beginning, and the end of all things. He is God's uniquely precious child, in order that we can be adopted into the family as God's children.

That's how much we matter within the scheme of things. That is how important God intends his children to be. Like Jesus, they are meant to be children of light every day of their lives.

Like Jesus, they are eternally loved and cherished.

Like Jesus, sometimes they suffer and die, but are raised to glory, hearing God say, "Yes. Yes" Well done good and faithful servant."

There is another point that ought to be clear, and it's this.

If God has meant this world to be good, then we cannot make discipleship a dirge, and following Jesus a miserable, punishing, journey of doom.

Christians are sometimes caricatured as negative, like the Rev I.M. Jolly for instance [Hullo, has it been a good year for you?].

They are also portrayed as judgmental of other people, especially critical of those who are having a good time.

The well-known text, which forms the basis of this sermon, is in no doubt. "God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten Son."

But if we read on, we come across this, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world could be saved." God's purpose is not punishment, reprisal, and vendetta. God has set his eyes on only one thing: how this sad world can be saved; how it can be made as wholesome and rich as he intended in the 1st place...from day one.

If we hear doom and gloom, remember there is another way.

The Gospel does not allow us to make people feel so depressed and worthless that they cannot climb again to the heights God meant them to scale.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't condemn injustice, prejudice, and bigotry. Far from it! But better still, we should have courage to live in God's way and let people see an alternative lifestyle for this age.

As John said, "Live as children of light." This is the best way to combat the darkness. It is the Jesus way.

Amen.