

In the first of his three Holy Week lectures at Canterbury Cathedral on Monday, Archbishop Juitn reflected on the optimism of the crowds on Palm Sunday, and how optimism based on our own understanding falls short of the eternal hope provided by God. Read an abridged version of the talk below.

Look round and just look over your shoulders, if you can manage it, at the West window. I just thought it was worth a gaze. I think it's looking so beautiful this evening. I think one of the greatest blessings of this place is living somewhere and coming regularly to a place that is full of beauty. It's a wonderful gift.

Everything in us causes us to respond to what we see and experience. We all have natural responses. Many of our reactions are simply because we are, in one sense or another, animals. When a zebra knows that it is being stalked by a lion, it runs. And within it, the adrenal glands are pumping out fight or flight responses into its muscles and brain. The same is true of human beings – a creak of floorboards downstairs in the middle of the night wakes us and we are suddenly very aware and very awake. Heart beating faster. Every sense to attention.

The zebra, if it escapes, will be seen 20 minutes later, contentedly chewing on some grass without a care in the world. The equivalent human being is sitting up in bed having to read a calming book when they discovered that the creaking floorboard was caused by the dog getting out of its bed. It happened to me last night, so you know that. That's why I'm aware. Prolonged or repeated exposure to high stress has little impact on the zebra. In fact, it's a normal part of life. But it will leave the human with ulcers, PTSD, and an inability to live normally.

We also, as humans, imagine unreal dangers. Many people are nervous about flying, but quite relaxed about the statistically more dangerous car journey after the flight. In other words, all of us live in two worlds at the very least. One of which is observed and experienced as the world around us. And the other of which is imagined as good, bad or ugly. And the imagined is often the one that shapes our emotions.

The preacher - to use the Hebrew title, Qoheleth, or Ecclesiastes - in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible declares that all life and existence is vanity. Everything is circular. What comes around goes around and nothing lasts. And whether the book is interpreted as an accurate portrayal of human life, or of human life without God, or, as one Jewish commentator puts it, whether it's the commonplace book of an aged and distinguished wisdom teacher, it is hard to say.

But what is clear is that this is someone who has an Eeyore tendency. Some of us are Tiggers, some of us are Eeyores. Probably some of us are many of the other characters in Winnie the Pooh. Rowan Williams once said to me, "There is almost no human situation that cannot be explained with the hermeneutical tools of Winnie the Pooh." Only Rowan could say that and be both humorous and profound at the same time.

The question asked is often whether these chemical and biological features of human physiology are determinative of what we're like. For example, Professor Susan Blackmore, who wrote a book called *The Meme Machine* in 1999, is a well-known atheist thinker and friend of Richard Dawkins, and an examiner of consciousness and human decision-making. We met and discussed the issues of choice and how we make human

choices in an interview I did with her. Her theory is that nothing we do is truly chosen, but is all predetermined, down to the most banal moments of whether I'll have a banana for my supper, if there's one available, or choose not to have one this evening.

I do want to raise the issue of human moods, and identity and its foundations. This series, as you know, is life in three words; optimism, despair and hope. A question underlying all the three words is whether they are driven by mood and context and emotion or whether there is a genuine choice before God. To what extent are we free agents? There is an important link here to our emotions and the way we live our lives as Christians. In each of the readings, there is a prevailing emotion for the disciples or the crowds. On Palm Sunday, it's optimism. In Gethsemane and after the arrest of Jesus, it's despair. On Easter Day, it's hope. It's a rollercoaster of a week for the original disciples, but a rollercoaster that has two very unsafe points. The first two; optimism and despair. At each one of those, we can be thrown off the ride.

Optimism, or its sibling pessimism, is based on false premises. And despair is a normal reaction when the world fails to be as we expect. Many of you will remember the name Vaclav Havel, a great protester against communism in what is now the Czech Republic, it was then Czechoslovakia, who ended up having been in prison. The sort of European Mandela in some ways, many ways, as a President of the Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic. He wrote, "Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." Or a British government minister during the talks on Northern Ireland, just over 25 years ago, as he came out each day from the talks was asked by the journalist, "Minister, are you optimistic?", and he invariably answered, "No. But I'm hopeful." He knew the difference.

Mood matters. In all spheres of life an optimist can take far too much risk. For example, when driving a car, convinced that he (it normally a he) is such a good driver that he will be fine. Those risks may be far greater than imagined. A pessimist can be so cautious that they won't even get into the car. An optimistic generally bets everything on a bold stroke. A pessimist bets nothing at all. But in order to make the right decision, there needs to have been a realistic assessment of their own and the other side's force. And one of the key dangers of optimism or pessimism is a worldview that does not understand the situation.

'Hosanna,' they cried. 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the King of Israel.' For the crowd, it was a moment when the promises of the past had finally met their dreams for the future, and there was an outburst of optimism. It seemed reasonable. I am an Eeyore, by the way. We will all have moments of optimism, but we'll also all have moments of pessimism. And there's nothing wrong with optimism or pessimism, as long as they're not too determinative of what we do.

The people in Israel, the Jewish people knew that the long-promised victory and liberation would be brought by a king, a Messiah like David, to restore Israel to independent glory. But because the crowds have one particular view of the future, which they interpreted in the light of that worldview, their hermeneutics was skewed by their worldview. They'd fallen into the habit of thinking they would shape their future in the way

that God would then support, rather than that God would shape it in the way he wanted. And Jesus, knowing exactly what he was doing, acts in fulfilment of the key prophecy in Zechariah. "Your king is coming seated on a donkey's colt." All the signs aligned. Here comes the king Israel have been waiting for. And what was so good about that?

This was the moment that God would finish everything he'd promised his long-suffering people. This was the beginning of a revolution that would see the world changed forever, but not in the way that the crowd or the disciples imagined and longed for. It's very rare that I quote Donald Rumsfeld, but as he famously said, "There are known knowns. There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns, that is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know." And it's not as ridiculous as it can sound. And it's not just other people. Our temptation as human beings, all of us, is to put our trust in the things we can hear and touch and hold onto. By instinct, we are materialists. And what we see and hold and touch is part of our fallen world.

Optimism is generated in business or sport or war or other human activities, by past success or by false information. So is pessimism. Each is self-reinforcing, not least because of the brain chemicals. Experience can swing us wildly from courageous and irrational optimism to over-cautious pessimism. John Maynard Keynes - and I know that's controversial, but I still think it, the greatest economist of the 20th century - in his great work on the theory of money, says: "The loss in the economy of animal spirits is what leads to recession and depression.". That is of optimism. We invest when we're optimistic. We know the disciples and the crowd don't understand Jesus' words that the Messiah must suffer and be crucified. And so, they base their response on Palm Sunday on what they see and what they think they know. And this is why optimism turns so quickly. It is entirely dependent on us and what we know and what we think we perceive. Our perceptions and opinions change our moods.

They change chemically what's going on inside us. There are many unknown unknowns in our lives; sickness, bereavement, estrangement from someone we love. They all knock down all of our plans for the future.

The Anthony Gormley sculpture Dean David will speak about is a reminder of our transience, our limitedness, the precariousness of our existence. It hangs over the tomb, or the burial place, of Thomas Beckett, who knew the risk of proclaiming God's word to a king. In Jeremiah Chapter 36, Jeremiah and Baruch write down the prophecies God has revealed to Jeremiah in the hope that people, that the king, will be spurred to mend his ways when God's will is revealed to them.

But as the scroll is read to the king, he cuts it up and burns it. He does not want the unknown unknown revealed. Jeremiah must, and naturally will have had, a moment of optimism when the king's advisors came and said, 'Come and see the King, he said he'll read what you've written.'

Abraham and Sarah, longing for children, abused their power. Abraham has a child with the enslaved Hagar rather than waiting on God for Isaac.

He seeks to build his own future rather than to trust the promises of God. So, in optimism, we build things on our own shaky foundations and they come crashing down. Jesus is not coming to conquer the city of Jerusalem and the Roman occupiers – well, not in the way they think. Neither will he liberate the Jewish people in the way they think. And so, the crowd turns on him.

The same crowd that welcomed Jesus as the one who comes in the name of the Lord, when given the choice five days later, choose Barabbas instead. A name, incidentally, that means son of the father. Perhaps it's each of us. We choose ourselves over Christ because we're optimists in some ways when it comes to the intangible and we choose ourselves over Christ who dies our death. But if we just paused and remembered the host of unknown unknowns, and that our vision of the world is not the full picture seen by God, and our optimism cannot hope to stretch to encompass the possibilities of Jesus and put our faith in God rather than having faith in ourselves.

As we consider the unknown unknowns, I want to remind us of what is a known unknown to us or known known to us, but an unknown unknown to so many people, which changes every person's world. And there's a clue to the point of these three talks. That the revolution we need is in this. That the unknown God, as God is described in John chapter one, nobody has seen God, nobody has known God. That the unknown God who has taken flesh in Christ. And in so doing, in his living and teaching, his suffering and dying reveals the greatest unknown to each of us. The height and depth and length and breadth of the love of God.

The statue downstairs in the crypt hangs between heaven and Earth. The figure of nails, it is embodied, it moves a little with the breeze. It inhabits a particular place and sees things, and is itself seen from a particular angle. Around it is the sacred space of the centuries. It is held up by threads we can barely see. And just so we cannot see just how God holds our brittle bodies up the whole time. We cannot fully understand how our fragile forms take shape and have purpose on Earth.

We cannot understand that the world is under the control of God. We don't see that. We see what we can touch and feel. We cannot understand that the church is loved by God and will be protected even when its silly members and sillier archbishops do silliest things. Our temporary and mercurial nature gives form to false optimism which shifts and changes as much as we ourselves do. The statue marvelously follows when there is no air moving in the crypt. The ever-shifting influence of magnetic north, not the fixed point of geographical north.

Optimism is natural and so is pessimism. They come from within us. They are a normal part of life. They are response to what happens. But when we put our whole weight on our own calculations, we find that what we expect has left out so much that matters that our optimism or pessimism points to different things, for a whole host of reasons we do not understand. They cannot bear the weight of our lives.

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