

I noticed an article this week written by Hans Rosling¹ about two weeks ago entitled *Good news at last: the world isn't as horrific as you think*. I found it a very helpful article he starts by saying *'things are bad, and it feels like they are getting worse, right? War, violence, natural disasters, corruption. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer; and we will soon run out of resources unless something drastic is done. That's the picture most people in the west see in the media and carry around in their heads. I call it the overdramatic worldview. It's stressful and misleading. In fact, the vast majority of the world's population live somewhere in the middle of the income scale.* In fact, as he quotes later in the article in 1966 over half the world's populations lived in extreme poverty living on less than the equivalent of \$2 a day. In 2017 this had fallen to only 9% of the total world's population – which given the increase in the world population in that 50 years is astounding.

Rosling reflects that *Our instinct to notice the bad more than the good is related to three things: the misremembering of the past; selective reporting by journalists and activists; and the feeling that as long as things are bad, it's heartless to say they are getting better. For centuries, older people have romanticised their youths and insisted that things ain't what they used to be. Well, that's true. Most things used to be worse. This tendency to misremember is compounded by the never-ending negative news from across the world.*

The article reminded me of a meeting I was at last year when a Senior Police Officer who was reporting on how crime in Brent, and in particular the part of Brent we live in, which is actually incredibly low – despite what we might think. He talked about a piece of research that an Oxford research team had undertaken on the experience of Crime, and those who felt that they were at risk. The research reported that the community in Britain which had the highest fear of crime, which was in the Cotswolds, and was a small town where most residents knew their neighbours – was actually the community with the lowest reported crime – and in fact there had been no serious incidents or break-ins in that community in the preceding 12 months.

What is it about human nature that means so often we see the glass half empty rather than half full – or that we are drawn to believe the worst rather than see the potential?

If we think that this is a problem for our modern media era however we are wrong. This is in fact part of the motivation behind Peter's encounter with Cornelius in Acts. Humans have a tendency to think about the world and its resources as limited, but the story of the resurrection is the story of God's limitless power and love. Even though Peter has experienced the limitless power of God, he is still finding it hard to believe that there might be enough

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2018/apr/11/good-news-at-last-the-world-isnt-as-horrific-as-you-think>

to go around to everyone. Peter experiences this first-hand throughout his encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10:1--11:18). He seems so convinced of the limited nature of God's forgiveness that even when God connects Cornelius and Peter, and Peter admits that "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34), he remains astounded when the Holy Spirit descends "even on Gentiles" (Acts 10:45)². But it does! Peter, for his part, seems to resist the urging of the Spirit at every turn. God, however, does not wait or question. God acts. God pours out God's Spirit -- and Cornelius, his slaves, and his whole household receive this gift of God's limitless power.

This might be hard for us to conceptualise – but it is an important part of the Easter message – the power and love of God are beyond the limits of our expectations – or our human constraints of what is possible.

Whether or not Peter understands or even agrees with the expanse of God's action, his encounter with Cornelius brings him to accept the limitless reach of God. The absurdity that Peter would imagine he could have prevented God is emphasized by the way in which he phrases his question in the first place -- "Who can withhold the water for baptizing these people?".

There is also something else at play here - this passage not only highlights the limitlessness of God but also highlights the expansion of insider/outsider boundaries within the early decades of the church. Peter throughout the proceeding verses struggles in visions and experiences to understand what this new church will be like. A church where all the boundaries of culture and custom are no longer the edges of this new community.

Sadly this struggle of who is in and who is out did not stop with the early church and continues to be a question which is constantly being raised. I don't think we should be discouraged by this, I think this reflects the strength of God's message and how counter our human instincts it is. We like to draw boundaries. God likes to open doors and welcome and love.

The challenge I think though is that often we forget to remember all the progress that God has made on this front – and continues to make. While there are still situations of oppression and submission which are not what God wants – a great deal of progress has been made both within and out of the church.

If we think just about this past week we had an election where citizens of our nation regardless of their cultural or socioeconomic background, or their gender or class were welcome to vote. This has only been the case for less than 100 years – but is amazing and it is not a reality for many.

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3658

This coming Saturday a woman will be installed as the 113th Bishop of London.

While there are boundaries still to be broken down – we have come along way!

The is summed up in the passage from John's gospel when we are invited to abide in God's love – and to love as God has loved us.

In this passage we are reminded we are Jesus friends, not his slaves – and that this commitment is not based on anything we have done or achieved but rather exists because of who Jesus is, and what his incarnation meant. Jesus is made known and in expressed in terms of what Jesus has learnt and heard from God. In John's gospel, love (the belovedness of friendship) and mutual knowledge, like love and commandment-keeping, go hand in hand.³ Jesus is saying here two things : he is the disciples' friend. He is willing to give his life for them. Yet he is not his disciples' equal. He retains a singular position. But he has brought them into a relationship of reciprocal love, creating a community of friends, willing to sacrifice themselves for each other.⁴

This is spelt out in verse 16, which builds on the image of the vine and the branches from last week - when John explains that it is Jesus who does the choosing and appointing. And for those of us who wish to abide in his love, this is surely good news, that we do not carve out a position as Jesus' friend and that our abundance does not depend on us; we might not even be able to imagine precisely what it will look like since we aren't the ones doing the pruning and can only see our part of the vine. We merely choose to abide in the love that has drawn us in, and then we blossom and bear fruit.

It is a powerful image as we come to the end of our Easter Celebrations this week. The message of Jesus death and resurrection should not be a source of setting up boundaries that limit or exclude, it is not about those who are in or out – or trying to ensure that those we don't agree with feel cut off. Sadly for much of the churches history this passage from John has been used in that very way. Rather the love God showed toward Jesus he showed toward his disciples so they could show it to each other. When they love in this way, their love becomes impregnated with divine qualities. It is not just an emotional, cozy feeling, but a conscious decision to put yourself on the line and risk everything for the other. This kind of love will make sure that justice is done in the world. You will venture yourself from the safety of your community into the broader society to see that it is transformed by this

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2435

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3649

sacrificial love that Jesus modelled for us. It is what the philosopher Cornel West describes *that justice is the shape love takes in society*.

As we look at the world through our Easter eyes God invites us to consider all the love that is possible if we live out justice. But more than that we are encouraged to not need the world as limited by its failures, but rather to look, see and act out of all that is possible.

It is the courage to not live as half glass empty people, but to live with the vision of God's half glass full. Amen.