

Reflection “Hope is absolutely necessary”

The two readings and the video about the Destiny Church Man Up programme are actually connected. But the central reading that is the foundation of what I am going to say is the Gospel from Luke about the signs of the end times and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

That passage was to give the hearers hope in amongst a really awful time.

When this passage was written most of the early followers of Jesus were Jews and their Jerusalem Temple had been destroyed as a consequence of the Jewish war and uprising. I don't know about earthquakes but I bet with the breakdown of society there was famine and there were plenty of disease which the old fashioned English translation rather quaintly called pestilences.

There is mention of the early Christians being persecuted, betrayed by their families and so on. I found that interesting, for I wondered how much of that actually happened in those three centuries after the Jewish war and before Constantine made Christianity the official religion.

I did a bit of digging around to try to find out what people who study this thought actually went on, and it seems as if persecution of Christians did happen. It was sporadic and tended to happen because there was some local unrest. As I read about what is thought represented reality it occurred to me that the passage about those silversmiths in Ephesus that we heard about in Acts was a probably good glimpse of reality. It reads like good factual reporting.

Christians tended to get offside with their communities because they broke very important social conventions that it seems Roman society held very dear. For Romans, religion was a sort of social contract. You did your bit of giving sacrifice to various gods and did your bit of taking part in the religious rituals because if you didn't then your superstitious neighbours would blame you when things went wrong. If you didn't do your thing for example to honour the god of war and one of your neighbours had a son killed in a battle, then you could be blamed.

By the end of the second century, the Christian apologist Tertullian complained about the widespread perception that Christians were the source of all disasters brought against the human race by the gods.

They think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its

waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, "Away with the Christians to the lions!"

It sounds just like Brian Tamaki blaming earthquakes on gays

Also because Christians and Jews maintained that there was only one God then it set them at odds with how things were for everyone else. The Jews tended to get away with it because they didn't go out trying to win converts and didn't stir things up. Roman society was tolerant of differences providing you didn't cause trouble. Also religion tended to be associated with loyalty to the state as it used to be in Europe and still is to a large extent in Muslim societies. Even for me brought up in the Church of England where the Queen is the head of the church. Supporting the Christian faith which of course was the Church of England and being English went hand in hand.

With the plethora of TV programmes about the kings and queens who reigned, or didn't because they lost their heads we have had lately you couldn't have missed that loyalty to the monarch and choice of your brand of Christianity went hand in hand. Anyway the same thing happened in Roman society, supporting the religious activities went hand in hand with loyalty and devotion to the emperor who was seen as a god anyway.

Another problem for Christians was the hierarchical society. People knew their place. Men over women, free people over slaves, aristocratic people over hoi polloi. Christians saying that all are one in Christ, slave and free, men and women etc. was a real disturbance. A slave might get ideas above his or her station and then woe betide the slave and also the Christians who put them up to such a disruptive notion.

Another aspect of difference was that in Roman society, religious practice was very public, done ostentatiously in the temples. Christians tended to do their religious thing in the privacy of their own homes or out of sight of everyone else, so people were suspicious of what Christians might get up to; like human sacrifice in communion services (the body and blood of Christ).

However by and large if Christians managed not to stir the pot then they were actually left alone. I read an estimate that in the time leading up to Constantine only a few thousand Christians would actually have been killed. But people being as we are, the scary tales would be circulated, probably be embellished like hagiography tends to be (those gruesome tales of ingeniously awful tortures) and people would vastly exaggerate the actual risk.

So I have tried to set the scene for that reading from Luke with a bit of good actual reporting from that story about Demetrius the aggrieved silversmith in Ephesus which was a long way from where the Jewish war was fought. Just a thought, we Christians are less zealous today, and I would say a whole lot more sensible for we have had a shop in Jackson street for years that does tarot readings, I know a church member who does it, and none of us seems in the least bothered about it.

One of the essential messages that all of us need, I expect even animals need is the hope that we are not going to be destroyed by our greatest fear. Our reading from Luke promises that in some way God will come to the rescue. The Jews came up with the idea that their martyrs would be rewarded in the afterlife. There is the story of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus, with Lazarus being in heaven later and the rich man who hadn't cared about him being in torment.

The idea of martyrs being rewarded with heaven is there in traditional Christianity, it is there in Islam with male martyrs having every red-blooded man's explicit vision of delights in heaven.

More seriously there are the Beatitudes which say blessed are those who have suffered in this life for they will be rewarded.

On a sad note illustrating the desperate need for hope; I have seen what it is like in amongst a lot of pokie machines in a Casino where people are hooked by the machine. I suspect that Lotto tickets are mainly bought by those for whom a windfall of money is a real hope that would change their life to what they imagine it would be. Gambling can be the only hope some people seem to have.

That gets me to that video clip promoting the Man Up programme of Destiny Church. Of course I have the usual white liberal opinions of that outfit and Brian Tamaki, but I could not give hope and transformation of life to the people that they claim to do. I cannot say whether the claims of the programme are realised in practice. But actually I cannot say what happened to those who were being persecuted and heard the promises written by Luke. I suspect that the Man Up programme might get it right. An article I read was about a Catholic priest Father Boyle, who works with gangs in the US. He said "lethal absence of hope has been infused into gang members, unable to see a future for themselves, they rebel. And in turn, get further away from their communities".

Sir Kim Workman says most gang members – whether they admit it or not – want to live a better life. Often they just need direction on how to find it. I know from my past involvement with a social programme in Christchurch that people who are pretty antisocial actually don't want to be like that.

The attention being given to mental health and the environment in which children are brought up is right. That article said The thousands of gang members who have walked through Father Boyle's office door – and the thousands more he's met who never got a chance because they are serving lengthy jail times – have all had one thing in common: childhood trauma.

Intergenerational drug dependency, poverty and violence are always hallmarks of a gang member's upbringing. It is these unseen scars which often force young people to flee their

pain in search of something more painful. Boyle says the often-used quote "pain that is not transformed is transmitted" is true.

People need hope. When things go wrong life seems like a black cave with no way out, but I believe the cave is nearly always a tunnel rather like the Rimutaka rail tunnel that goes up to a high point and then descends so you cannot see the light at the far end, but it's there to be found as long as you keep going.

Both the Gospels, programmes like Man Up, good counselling and often the obvious love of family and friends provide hope. Hope is absolutely necessary for all sentient life.